CBW

Number One
For PSV Professionals

COACH AND BUS WEEK March 29, 2006 **Issue 723** £2.50

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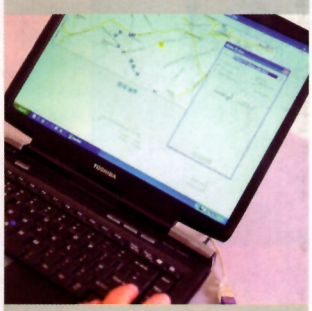
THIS WEEK

No Rush
Operator bids for licences on third appearance
page 18

Partnership
and how a North West forum defined operator-council relations page 28



Electric guiding
Open-top tours take GPS-driven commentary option
page 30

Last stop
Bus humour, and the latest Dilbert management speak
page 43

Future fuel?

Nine years on, Stockholm is showing that bioethanol works page 16

FREE! Minibus magazine inside

Less Bucks, More Fizz

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Brown budget was grey

There wasn't much to shout about in any area of Gordon Brown's budget, with most pundits taking the view that no news for the industry is good news.

But that was a 'least worst' kind of response. I believe that every time we sit back in our easy chairs breathing a sigh of relief it's a sign that the budget was a missed opportunity for the government to promote public transport.

Dig deep into the 300-odd pages of the budget and there are a few grains of gold dust which, for an optimist like me, could signal nuggets beyond. It depends on whether you genuinely believe policy will eventually convert into action...

There's more money for education, as always, and that can't be bad for industry, which these days needs skills, not labour.

The budget talks strongly about the environment and while Greenpeace would like to have seen more Draconian measures than an affordable road fund licence increase for 4x4s, the chancellor seems to have the will to move the transport debate forward. And at least fuel taxes didn't rise.

It may not be core to the business, but there are new grants available for 'microgeneration' of power - solar heating, wind turbines and the like, plus aid for energy-efficient new-build.

Perhaps more interestingly, by 2010, the government hopes its tax regimes will deliver a target of 5% biofuels mix in road fuels use; Stagecoach has done it already with biodiesel.

The missed opportunity was one of putting serious funding in place for road priority measures, ring-fenced and providing local authorities - for which, read elected councillors - with the heavy armour of imposed policy. The total CO_2 savings would have knocked into a cocked hat anything that can be delivered by fiddling around with fuel tax.

Mark Williams

Mark Williams
Editor

Coach and Bus Week is a supporter of the following organisations:

COACH TOURISM COUNCIL
Promoting Travel and Tourism by Coach

ABC

British Travel Trade Fair
1-2 March 2006
NEC, Birmingham

cpt

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Contents

Fare enough?
England gets the national fares scheme pensioners wanted. But will Gordon Brown's handout cover it?
pages 4 and 5

Biofuels
It's ethanol, it works and it's here. London hosts an ethanol bus that's been running nine years
pages 16 and 17

IT Marketing
Tech explained: How to use computers, phones and the web to grow your business
pages 23 to 25

MAN enough
Neoman says it's poised to move on the UK bus market, with 9% already and more in its sights
pages 26 and 27

Regulars

News	4
Regional News	12
Tour News	14
Open Platform	20
Inbox	21
Products	30
Deliveries	31
Last Stop	43

Concessionary budget shock

Pensioners get extra £250m towards bus fares

Just a day after Prime Minister Tony Blair met with MPs to discuss the controversial Concessionary Travel scheme, Chancellor Gordon Brown announced an extra £250m in the Budget to extend it into a nationwide, free scheme.

The news was welcomed around the industry, even from Nexus who were the highest profile losers in the previous scheme, and whose funding problems this year and next will not be solved by the new scheme.

"From April 2008, over 11 million older and disabled people in England will now be able to take advantage of free off-peak bus travel in every area of the country," says Alistair Darling, Secretary of State for Transport.

The £250m is on top of the £350m granted to the original Concessionary Travel scheme, which starts on April 1. The national scheme will work in the same way as the existing local scheme, allowing free off-peak (after 9:30am) travel for the elderly and disabled during the week, and all weekend. It will not allow free travel throughout the UK, only within each county region.

The government says it is part of its work to support social inclusion and encourage greater bus use, and that a national scheme was always what it wanted, subject to funding being available.

Brian Nimick, director general of the CPT says: "This is very good news for the bus passenger, and for the industry. We have always been clear that a full national scheme was needed, and we are delighted that the government has listened to our representations."

Mike Parker, director general of Nexus, said: "This is good news for passengers in the future and something we have been pushing for, for some time.

"It does not change the fact that we are having to cut services this coming year, and may have to cut them next year, before the national scheme comes into effect. We are continuing to press government to deal with the financial problems it has created now, and which will be felt by passengers next month.

Budget put extra cash in the kitty for a nationwide, free scheme... but only off-peak

"We have yet to study the details of what the Chancellor has announced, but we assume it will mean that government administers the scheme, ending the confusing situation for passengers who wish to cross local council boundaries."

The government says its will consult local government and the bus industry on the detailed arrangements later this year, and that whether the scheme is administered locally or centrally is not yet decided.

Stagecoach is testing its low-cost coach travel Stateside

Megabus 'clone' for the US

Chicago will become the hub of a new low-cost inter-city coach travel system from Stagecoach which will give the US one of the few innovations in passenger road transport in the last 25 years.

Brian Souter, chief executive of Stagecoach plc - whose Coach USA operation will run the pilot-scheme, megabus.com - said that it is based on the discount airline concept, with all bookings to be made on the internet. On April 10, routes will cover destinations in eight mid-western cities including Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis and Milwaukee.

The programme comes at a time when there have been major cut-backs by Greyhound which have left regions of some states, notably Oregon, without public transport. Megabus.com is aimed at leisure travellers, students and senior citizens with fares, pitched low to entice travellers; fares range from$9 to $27. There will also be at least three or four 'teaser' fares at $1 on each departure.

It will probably be at least nine months before public response to Brian Souter's travel alternative can be identified. If successful it will be extended to other parts of the US.

CPT v Cogent

The government's delaying of the implementation date for new seatbelt laws has sparked a row between the CPT and seating supplier Cogent Passenger Seating.

Just before *CBW* went to press, the CPT released a statement accusing Cogent of misleading operators with an advert about the upcoming legislation.

The advert warned that under the EC Directive 2003/20, due for implementation on May 9, operators are required to extend compulsory seat belt wearing to all passengers aged three and over. Later it quotes: 'With a few exceptions, all seats with seat belts should bear a prescribed sign or pictogram notifying passengers that seatbelts must be won. Failure to do so renders both the operator and driver each liable to the £500 fine mentioned above'.

The EU said the directive must be implemented no later than May 9, but delays in the UK mean the law will not now be enacted until September.

CPT operations director Steven Salmon told *CBW*: "It is good practice to inform passengers that they should wear their seatbelts - and it is a requirement in several continental countries. However, Cogent are being highly misleading and jumping the gun as far as UK Regulations are concerned. We are advising members to see what the final regulations say before deciding on any new signs."

Cogent managing director Roger Pownall, who was unaware of the statement until *CBW* telephoned him, denied that his company was trying to mislead customers. He says the date of implementation changed after the advert was sent to the printers. He told *CBW*: "We had been in communication with the DfT and that was the understanding we had when the advert went to press. It is rather sad that contemporaneously the DfT changed the date. I will put my hand up - the date is wrong. It's unfortunate but not unknown."

The CPT statement also says that Cogent is misleading by saying that signs are the only way to inform passengers they must wear seat belts. Mr Pownall counters that his advert says the DfT has proposed that the most cost-effective way to ensure that passengers are informed is to use a sign, and that the advert does say that "a number of methods are permitted."

'Protest group' evolves as operator association

An operator group formed to discuss 'unworkable' school contract rules has been transformed into a new operators' association.

Meetings of Kent operators which began last year and built up momentum as it fought against what it saw as imposed and unfair contracts eventually formed strong ties, and now the Kent Bus and Coach Operator Group has been formalised.

"The group is open to all operators based in or operating in Kent," said its new secretary Eric Baldock, who works for Autocar in Tunbridge Wells. The group has a five-point list of aims:

- Raise awareness of the key issues to opinion formers
- Promote best practise within the industry
- To act as a local focus for the industry
- To inform members of new developments and issues
- To obtain legal advice on matters of common interest

Chairman of the group is Nu Venture's Norman Kemp, and treasurer is Clive Eglinton of Chalkwell of Sittingbourne. Its committee includes Ray Gould of Marshopper of New Romney, Kevin Hawkins of Arriva Maidstone, and Roland Eglinton of Chalkwell.

"The help we managed to get from the Confederation of Passenger Transport was a sign of how much could be achieved if we stood together," said one member.

An inaugural meeting at which potential members can hear from its officers is being arranged, but Mr Baldock says any operator can contact him in advance at *eric.baldock@btinternet.*

National Express has submitted a planning application for its £8m Digbeth Coach Station, described as a "shimmering metallic terminal building... of city scale and significance." The final appearance of the station has not been finalised, NatEx has applied only for outline planning permission. The details will change from the artist's impression shown here, but the interior will feature 16 coach bays, improved parking facilities, a meet and greet area and a taxi rank. Nat Ex has been working with world famous architects MAKE – who designed London's 'Gherkin' – on the project. John Man of MAKE says: "The design of the coach station will be of the highest quality, with the commitment to deliver a world-class gateway building for the City of Birmingham. The redevelopment will greatly improve the physical and social environment in and around Digbeth, and provide a modern facility."

Briefly

According to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, digital tachographs will become mandatory from May 5. Any commercial vehicle over 3.5 tonnes registered after this date has to be fitted with the device. The SMMT has heard that the European Parliament will publish the relevant part of the new drivers' hours part of the Working Time Directive in the EU Official Journal on April 15, meaning it becomes law throughout Europe 20 days later... on May 5.

Despite there being no news in the budget, the government says it will "continue to consider the scope for an incentive for early take-up of Euro V standards for buses and coaches".

The UK has the most expensive fuel in Europe. The average price in March was €1.37/ litre, an increase of 0.45% over February. The next most expensive is Italy, at €1.13. The price of fuel in Ireland fell by 2.1% in the same period. The cheapest places to buy fuel are Spain and Poland, at €0.95.

PSC driving test fees will increase by £4 to £89 from April 1. The DSA says it is a self-funding organisation and, since it does not receive tax payer's money, it needs to increase the charge to cover its costs, while also improving the quality and efficiency of its services.

The appropriately named Carl Fitter, a school teacher in Kent, is training for next month's London Marathon by racing against the school bus. Mr Fitter races the bus 8km on its way back from school swimming trips. He says he has only beaten it a "couple of times".

Disc-Lock Europe will debut an indestructible wheel nut at the CV show in April. The improved Disc Lock Safety Wheel Nut features better socket engagement and a new environmentally friendly, chrome-free coating.

Prestige the first Scots firm with liquor licence

Mark Williams

A Scottish operator is believed to be the first-ever to get an off-sales licence for his fleet of coaches.

Prestige Tours of Renfrew says it researched the existing law and found that it was possible to apply for a licence. After checking their research with a QC, they went ahead and got the OK from Renfrewshire Licensing Board.

"In Scotland, the carriage of alcohol on coaches is actually illegal. However, we have found a way to legalise it," Euan Finlayson, Prestige's MD told CBW. "As a result, we are now looking for five executive coaches kitted out to fulfil the legal requirements of the licence."

Mr Finlayson said the licence actually allows his company to offer sale of alcohol on any vehicle. However, Mr Finlayson said the licence carries with it a duty of care.

"We have made assurances to the licensing authority that we are not about to get into the hen party market. We run a lot of corporate business, and our customers would sometimes like to have a glass of champagne on the way to dinner, for example."

Similarly, Prestige carries international soccer teams, who may like a celebratory drink on the return leg of their journey.

■ Different licensing laws apply in the UK, where it is legal to allow passengers to drink alcohol, except when working within the rules of the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985, which do not allow alcohol aboard en route to 'designated' events, and stopping where alcohol is sold only if part of a meal stop. It is also possible to licence vehicles for on-board sales.

Tanat Valley Plaxton do you know where it is?

Coach stolen from Welsh borders

Welsh border operator Tanat Valley Coaches wants to know where a Plaxton Paramount 3500 mk3-bodied Volvo B10M, registration number H191 VVG is in hiding.

The vehicle was stolen from Llanrhaeadr Ym Mochnant depot overnight last Wednesday. It carries the company's distinctive 'executive' West Bus-style livery of lower cream panels, and upper maroon panels under the windows, and has maroon speckles from the front side window down to the front corner.

It has C51F seats, and is also equipped with a toilet and CD player. The vehicle also carries the fleet number 491. Operations Manager Nick Cullifford said: "It's a very important private hire coach to us and is also a favourite with our drivers".

Tanat Valley Coaches has over 60 vehicles operating from depots at Llanrhaeadr Ym Mochnant and Pentrefelin, some 14 miles west of Oswestry.

■ Anyone with information is asked to contact Mike Morris, managing director on 01691 780 212 or via e-mail on info@tanat.co.uk .

Real-time tracking for The King Ferry commuters

Steve O'Neill

Gillingham-based The Kings Ferry has launched a unique coach tracking system that allows its commuter customers to check for real-time departure and arrival information.

Coachtrac offers any of its commuters information via a mobile phone or PDA mini-computer. In addition to showing computer users the exact location of its 35 services, run under The Kings Ferry and The Travel Link brands.

The system uses GPS tracking to send a location signal every 30 seconds to the website.

After registering with The Kings Ferry, commuters have only to start their WAP internet service on a mobile phone to get the latest position of any vehicle. The advantages are not only the end of uncertainty, said The Kings Ferry MD Steve O'Neill. "Some of our London commuters work flexitime, and being able to track service accurately means that they can 'clock off' with some precision, ensuring they are getting paid for time which might otherwise be wasted," he said. "It also means they can transfer with certainty to a later or earlier service."

The service can also be used by the families of commuters who want to know when a spouse will arrive home. The congestion of major routes from Kent into London makes hitting the schedules very difficult.

Coachtrac is being marketed to a growing commuter base

Volvo seeks solution to B12B fault

A Bedfordshire operator is faced with a further three-week wait from Volvo to remedy a fault with his new coaches.

On A Mission of Leighton Buzzard collected four new Volvo B12B Jonckheere Mistral coaches from Volvo Coach Sales of Loughborough on March 1, aiming to meet the requirements of a client who wanted vehicles less than three years old. But almost straight away, two of them came to a halt while cornering.

"One of the vehicles even locked the rear wheels in the wet without the driver having physically applied the brakes," said partner in the business Milan Bjelobaba.

Volvo engineers who checked the vehicles the following morning could not locate the fault, but the next day, another coach had the same problem, and engineers again could not duplicate the fault.

Later the same day, senior staff from Volvo Bus HQ at Warwick witnessed the fault first hand, and identified the culprit as the Electronic Stability Program (ESP), designed to take control of braking should the coach become unstable. They then disconnected the ESP system, which illuminated dashboard warning lights.

"Volvo assured us the vehicles were safe to use," said Mr Bjelobaba. "The warning lights on the dashboards have had to be covered up with black tape. Since then, Volvo has managed to extinguish the warning lights electronically."

Volvo returned four Jonckheeres part-exchanged for the Volvos to On A Mission so the company had no business interruption, and offered a compensation payment. The ECU was flown to Sweden by a senior Volvo executive but last week, examination of the electronics indicate that it could be three weeks before a solution is found.

Mike Ball, MD Volvo Bus Ltd, confirmed: "The customer has reported a problem on his new vehicles. We have responded to the enquiry through our network and identified the problem. Action was taken to allow the vehicles to continue in use while a permanent resolution of this intermittent fault is found."

One of four Volvo B12Bs awaiting a remedy

Is this the biggest schools' movement ever?

All that jazz!

Moving 2,700 young jazz enthusiasts from Campden to the Albert Hall required the combined resources of Reliance of Gravesend, Redwing of Brixton and TWH Travel of London... all part of the Redwing Group.

In all, 51 coaches were working, and main contractor Reliance says it believes the contract to be the largest single movement of children ever: "With the combined Redwing Group we have capacity to move nearly 4,000 people in one hit," said group sales and marketing manager Keith Payne.

Coach shortage hits fans

Swansea soccer fans heading for the LDV Vans Final at the Millennium Stadium this weekend say getting there is being made difficult by a lack of coaches.

"It's becoming a struggle to get coaches, not to fill them up," said a fan club spokesman. "Ten years ago when we had such a big exodus there were far more coach companies in the local area. It's not just us looking for coaches, it's sports club, social clubs, everybody."

The problem has been exacerbated by engineering works on the eastbound rail link and the 100% price hike in park and ride charges; to £10 for the day. Swansea's Swans Travel Club says it has filled 33 of 36 coaches it could hire, but the total attendance to the Carlisle-Swansea fixture is expected to be 30,000.

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BUDGET SPECIAL

Paula Tallon

Budget? What budget?

No news is good news, as Gordon Brown's budget avoids traditional tax hikes. Tax expert Paula Tallon looks at the rest

SUMMARY

- New Corporation Tax rates confirmed
- Increase in First Year Allowances for plant and machinery
- Self Assessment filing dates changed
- Changes to two investment schemes
- Removing tax free benefits to home computers and mobile phones
- Increases in thresholds and rates

As well as the concessionary fare scheme reported on page 4-5, fuel tax kept stable, and extra money for the nationwide concessionary fare scheme were the headline announcements last week.

In what is possibly Brown's final budget, the passenger transport industry got off lightly for once. But as with all budgets, the devil is in the detail. There were many minor changes to company fiscal matters which, together, deserve some attention.

Corporation Tax Rates

The U-turn on the 0% corporation tax rate on profits of less than £10,000 announced in the pre-budget report in December 2005 was confirmed. For small companies with taxable profits of less than £300,000 the rate of tax will be 19%. For companies with profits above £1.5 million the full rate of 30% will be payable. Marginal relief is given to smooth the transition from one rate to another. These limits are reduced to take into account associated companies.

Prior to April 1, 2006 where a company makes a distribution to a non-corporate, i.e. an individual, and corporation tax had not been paid at a minimum rate of 19% the company will pay 19% corporation tax on the profits distributed. With the abolition of the zero-rate tax this non-corporate distribution rate will be abolished and so all companies with profits below £300,000 will now pay tax at 19%.

First Year Allowances

The rate of first year allowances for expenditure by small businesses on qualifying plant and machinery will be increased to 50% for new expenditure incurred between April 6, 2006 and April 5, 2007. A small business is one which satisfies two of the following conditions: not more than £5.6 million in turnover; not more than £2.8 million in assets; not more than 50 employees.

Self-Assessment Filing Date Change

Measures were announced to move the following deadline for income tax self-assessment returns to 30 September where returns are on paper or November 30 (currently January 31) where the returns are filed online. It is intended that these changes will be effective from 2008 and will be introduced on a phased basis. By 2012 it is expected that all income tax self-assessment returns will be filed by these dates.

Tax rises were notably absent, but Gordon Brown's 10th Budget isn't short of changes to small business funding

In addition to this, computer-generated paper substitute returns currently used by accountants will no longer be accepted.

Venture Capital Schemes

Some changes to Venture Capital Trusts (VCTs) and Enterprise Investment Schemes (EIS) were announced in the budget.

The Chancellor announced that a new income tax relief for investors in Venture Capital Trusts (VCTs) would be "increased" to 30%. Previously the rate had previously been 40%. In addition the minimum period for which investors must hold their shares will increase from three years to five years.

Bigger changes were announced for EIS investments. The doubling of the income tax relief for the annual investment limit to £400,000 is a welcome increase. However the change in the gross assets test will mean that less companies will be eligible for EIS relief. Under the current rules the gross asset of the company raising money under EIS must not exceed £15 million immediately before the investment and £16 million immediate after. These limits will be reduced to £7 million and £8 million from April 6, 2006.

Technology

Announcements in connection with the current exemptions for computers and mobile phones came as a big surprise. The exemptions for computers have been around since 1999 and the government have actively encouraged Home Computer Initiative (HCI) schemes which rely on this exemption.

Under current rules no taxable charge arises where an employee is provided with computer equipment with a value of up to £2,500. This is on the basis that there is no transfer of ownership in the property and the scheme is available to all employees. Without the exemption the employee would be subject to a benefit in kind on 20% of the value of the assets i.e. £500.

Mobile phones were also under attack and limits placed on the exemption. Under current legislation employers can provide mobile phones with unlimited private use to their employees and members of their household. The new measures which will be introduced from April 6, 2006 will mean that only one tax-free mobile phone is available per employee.

Thresholds and Rates

The VAT registration threshold has been increased to £61,000 from April 1, 2006 and the de-registration threshold up to £59,000.

The turnover limit for using the annual accounting scheme has been increased to £1,350,000 per annum with effect from April 1, 2006.

The scale charges that tax fuel that is supplied for private use have been increased to take account of the rise in the price of fuel.

Paula Tallon is Director and Head of Direct Tax at Chiltern plc. ***tallonp@chilternplc.com***

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cogent

Briefly

Commercial Motor magazine reports that three traffic commissioners are due to retire in 2007, leading to a shake up of the system. David Dixon in the Midlands and Wales, Geoffrey Simms in the Eastern Traffic area and Chris Heaps in the South-east are all due to go at around the same time.

Hammersmith & Fulham and Camden Councils have both had their Local Implementation Plans (LIP) approved by the Mayor of London. The plans must include strategies on improving bus journey times and reliability and relieving congestion.

Essex County Council launched a new personalised transport planner for passengers this week. It is giving out a free postcard in the larger town centres that can be filled in with the customer's home address details. The County Council then sends out public transport information like details of local bus stops, timetables and maps.

Ninety eight percent of Herefordshire passengers say they feel safe when traveling by bus in the county, an independent market research survey has revealed. Reliability, cleanliness, comfort and convenience all scored highly. The survey was commissioned to track the progress of the county's £4m investment programme that helped buy 50 low floor buses since 2001. Ridership increases on the upgraded routes averages at 11%, with 20% of passengers saying they also had a car available.

The EU Environment Committee says the EU must wean itself off oil by 2030. A non-binding resolution to the EU Energy Committee says: "The EU's energy strategy should concentrate initially on the total substituion of fossil fuel use inn the transport sector by 2030." It also proposes an 'energy consumption per kilometre' label to give consumers an informed choice.

Jobs threat at 'Trakky'

UP to 57 employees could leave Yorkshire Traction in Barnsley, after Stagecoach management announced the planned closure of the company's central engineering works at Upper Sheffield Road. The company is currently consulting staff, and some employees could accept other engineering posts or driving vacancies; the final numbers will be known by the end of the week, and the works will close next month.

Yorkshire Traction was one of the last former National Bus Company subsidiaries to retain its central works facility, where major overhauls and repair work was undertaken. Engineering and MOT preparation will be moved down to depot level, with the company choosing either to outsource, or use in-house facilities for major overhauls, painting or accident repairs.

Tony Cox, Stagecoach's regional director (South), who has taken over as MD of Stagecoach in Yorkshire, told *CBW* that the company had mounted a consultation with all affected employees, and not all of them would be leaving. "We have announced up to 57 redundancies, but the final number depends on how many wish to stay on in other jobs," he said.

Although the Stagecoach Group has not yet been given clearance for the £37m acquisition of the whole Yorkshire Traction Group by the Office of Fair Trading, the closure of the works and consequent redundancies, have been cleared by the OFT.

Yorkshire Traction engineering director Norman Cooke has tendered his resignation and will be leaving at the end of May. He was one of the original Yorkshire Traction MBO team. Mr Cooke's departure is unrelated to the engineering reorganisation, and the company is currently advertising for a replacement.

Paul Hill, Lincolnshire Road Car's managing director, is retiring at the end of this month, having led the company for 23 years, from NBC subsidiary through to privatisation. The senior director at Road Car in Lincoln, until his successor is appointed, will be Derek Bradley, who is engineering and operations director.

Shake-up at subsidiary Lincs Road Car as Hill retires

Oxford Bus Co drivers charged

Two Oxford Bus Company drivers have been charged by police following an inquest into the death of a cyclist in 2004.

Paul Willis is being charged with careless driving and breaching passenger carrying vehicle regulations, while Henry Stuart is being charged with the latter offence. Mr Willis' bus killed student Emilie Harris when she fell off her bike into his path on the Cowley Road in May 2004. The inquest was told that Mr Willis was seen chatting with Mr Stuart just before the accident.

"Whether Mr Stuart actually obstructed the vision forwards is unlikely, but his presence there must have been a distraction," said Coroner Richard Whittington at the inquest at Oxford's Old Assizes.

A statement from the Oxford Bus Company says: "Ever since the tragic accident our thoughts have been with Emilie's parents and family. Emilie's death has deeply affected everyone at the Oxford Bus Company. We can't comment further at this stage as a court case involving the driver is still active and until that is finished our own inquiry into the incident and any possible disciplinary action cannot be concluded."

The inquest was told that Ms Harris had been traveling at 8mph approaching a narrowing road, while the bus gained on her at speeds in the low 20s. An accident investigator says the bus driver should have slowed to the same speed as the cyclist. The Coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death.

EU 'wake-up call' for Irish deregulation

Operators and opposition party say latest concession 'worst of both worlds'

Gabriel Conway, Irish correspondent

The news that the EU Commission is to investigate state funding for CIE bus fleet (*CBW*, March 22), has been hailed as a major step forward in the fight for a level playing field for the Republic's private bus and coach operators.

But both operators and opposition politicians have blasted a proposal from the Department of Transport which would offer just 15% of routes in private operation, in return for a further increase in the size of the state-owned Dublin Bus fleet.

"Passengers in Dublin want more buses on more routes in order to have more choices about where to travel. However, new proposals from the Department of Transport will enforce the status quo and keep the number of new bus routes and services to a minimum. This will cap the number of new routes which can be opened," Fine Gael transport spokesperson Olivia Mitchell told *CBW*.

"The private operators would have their hands tied because the number of new routes being opened up to competition would be restricted to 15% of existing routes. This decision is the worst of both worlds and puts passenger needs firmly in second place."

The proposals, brokered after several years of discussion with the CIE unions, have not been officially confirmed by the Department of Transport, but details provided to *CBW* from political and union sources indicate that market liberalization will be subject to a quota, and that further growth of the CIE operating companies will be allowed.

"These proposals are totally unacceptable, we will not settle for anything which restricts the ability of private operators to compete in the marketplace," a spokesperson for the Coach Tourism and Transport Council told *CBW*.

Meanwhile, the decision by the EU Commission to investigate the CTTC's complaint into the funding of additional buses already provided to the state operator has provoked differences of opinion amongst the coalition partners in government.

Irish transport minister Martin Cullen says the CTTC's complaint is premature. Below: The proposals would give Dublin Bus an extra 100 buses.

THE MAIN PROPOSALS SEEN BY CBW INCLUDE:

- **Approval for an additional 100 new buses for Dublin Bus**
- **Dublin Bus to retain all of its current network**
- **New routes equal to only 15% of the current market will be tendered to private operators**
- **After the 15% quota is reached, Dublin Bus can apply for any further routes in competition with the private sector**
- **CIE and its operating companies will not be sold or broken up.**
- **New legislation to replace the 1932 transport act**

"The CTTC are putting the cart before the horse [with this complaint]," transport minister Martin Cullen stated, adding that proposals from his department on the liberalisation of the market in Dublin would address the issues of concern to the independent sector: "A proposal on the bus market in Dublin will be taken to Cabinet shortly."

However, coalition partners in the Progressive Democrats have welcomed news of the investigation. PD transport spokesman Senator Tom Morrissey told *CBW*: "The private operators are reacting to a report that says 300 buses have been bought by Dublin Bus with State funds since 1999. I understand that Dublin Bus is currently demanding an additional 120 buses.

"Why should the taxpayer fund 120 extra buses at a cost of some €300,000 (£200,000) each while there are 5,000 under-utilised buses in the private sector? These private vehicles will cost the taxpayer nothing. We need a more competitive bus market: the more buses, the better."

Of the small number of private operators currently competing in the Dublin market, several have spoken to *CBW* in the past year about instances of publicly-funded additional buses being used to increase services on routes in direct competition with their own, including Mortons of Rathfarnham, Dualway, and other smaller operators.

"All we are looking for is a level playing field," Dualways operations manager David McConn told *CBW* recently.

"We are quite prepared to go into the market and stand or fail on the quality of our service to the public, but when the competition is using buses that they have been given by the taxpayer, while we have to fund ours from passenger fares, how can we compete fairly?"

Regional News

CBW takes a look at the big issues where you live in our round-up of the regions. If you've got a local issue you would like us to cover, contact Andrew Peace at *andrew.peace@rouncymedia.co.uk*

SCOTLAND

The grandfather of a young girl seriously injured getting off a school bus is petitioning the Scottish Parliament to improve signage and safety on school services.

Erin Beaty was hit by an oncoming car when getting off the school bus in March 2004 and spent six weeks in a coma, and 11 months in hospital. She suffered brain damage and is now, aged 10, confined to a wheelchair. During her time in hospital, her family came across four other children who had each been hurt in road traffic accidents whilst using school transport.

Lobbying from her grandfather, Ron Beaty, means the issue is now to be debated by the Petitions Committee of MSPs in Scottish Parliament on April 19. He says improved signs on school buses would help: "Signs have become permanent fixtures, with little informative power. We need signs with an impact visibility factor - signs that give a clear and adequate warning. In some US states and Canada, it is illegal for cars to pass school buses. We surely cannot allow children to be killed and injured when a simple common sense remedy is available."

Mr Beaty, backed by the charity The Child Brain Injury Trust, hopes that the parliamentary discussion will spark a change in the law across the UK. The campaign is also calling for Local Education Authorities and bus companies to implement safety measures at school bus stops. These include 'flashing signs' warning drivers to slow down, and LED warning signs on the back of buses.

■ The fourth **Scottish Transport Awards**, backed by the Centre for Transport Policy at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, have been launched. Out of 15 categories, seven are aimed at local authorities, but operators will have the chance to compete for Scottish Public Transport Operator of the Year. The closing date for entries is Friday, May 12, and the awards will be presented at the Scottish Transport Dinner on November 16, at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, with a conference the next day. For more info see *www.abs.ac.uk/cftp.*

NORTH

The **North West Museum of Raod Transport**, formerly St Helen's Transport Museum, will reopen at Easter after a £1.5 million revamp.

The Museum, which houses a collection of classic buses - including AEC, Crossley, Daimler and Leonard chassis with East Lancs bodywork - has been closed for the last 10 years.

Dave Holden, chair of the Museum board, says: "We have worked long and hard with our partners to get to this point and have overcome many set backs along the way. Our volunteers have always remained committed to reopening the Museum since its closure in 1994."

The refurbishment work has seen repairs to the roof, a new reception area, internal decoration, a glazed wall providing views into the museum, plus new cladding, graphics and signage to the front entrance of the building. The building will be heated by solar panels. Visitor numbers are expected to reach 20,000 a year.

The work has been funded by a variety of sources, including the DTI, English Heritage and the European Regeneration Fund. The museum also houses a collection of fire service vehicles, breakdown vehicles and cars.

The North West Museum of Road Transport will reopen at Easter

■ Eleven of the vehicles announced in **Stagecoach**'s recent order will be allocated to its Kingston-upon-Hull depot. All the vehicles are Alexander Dennis ALX400 deckers on the Trident chassis, and will be fitted with LED destination equipment. They have all been allocated to a specific route, which will be rebranded, extended, simplified and have increased frequency. A further 31 low floor double-deckers will be cascaded to the Kingston fleet later in the year. Over 65% of the fleet will then be accessible.

■ **Northumbria Council** is cutting subsidy for 25 bus routes after a spending review.

The council will only increase its council tax bill by 1.8% this year, but says it needs to save £8 million a year. Its current subsidy budget is £600,000 per year, plus £800,000 in government grants. The council targeted routes where fares make up less than 40% of the cost of the route, or where the subsidy cost more than £3 per passenger. The changes will be introduced on June 4.

MIDLANDS

Rioting school children are alleged to have broken 13 windows on a brand new **TWM** service decker last week.

Briefly

■ **Belfast is to pilot a weekend late night bus to get drinkers home safely. The routes will operate north, south, east and west over a four month period, with a £3 flat fare. The scheme is part of a wider Get Home Safe campaign which has already "significantly reduced assaults and violent crime". The scheme will use four deckers.**

■ **First drivers in Bristol will now accept £20 notes after a ban on their use was called off after complaints from passengers. The company says it had been taking around £800 a week in fake £20s, but has reversed the decision "due to customer feedback".**

Above: Chris Grayling MP. Top, the vandalised TWN decker

Briefly

Flintshire Council is to cut £170,000 from its £860,000 bus subsidy budget. Council officials mistakenly sent out a fax informing operators of the cuts before the detail had been worked out, causing "widespread alarm" amongst members of the public. The cuts stand and will be implemented from May 15.

The riot happened shortly after the bus picked the children up from near a school noted for behavioural problems in the past. The vandals covered up CCTV cameras with advertising boards ripped off the walls and then used bricks to smash the windows.

It is not known how many other passengers were aboard at the time, although no injuries were reported.

TWM spokesman Phil Bateman says: "This is vandalism on a scale rarely seen elsewhere. It puts people at risk from damage and injury and we're just aghast at the constant problems we get in some parts of the city. We are absolutely distraught. To be faced with a situation like this is really, really difficult."

The school says it will cooperate fully with police inquiries. No arrests have been made.

■ Shadow transport minister Chris Grayling MP held a meeting with West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority members last week.

A statement from **Centro** says they were, "aiming to win support for an ambitious programme of improvements to bus and rail services". Rail patronage is increasing in the area, while bus patronage is falling. The statement continues: "Councillors are looking for political support to make bus companies deliver a better service for passengers."

Chairman councillor Gary Clarke says: "We need to make more national politicians aware of the issues we face here in the West Midlands. We are seeking to develop a more integrated public transport network with high quality services underpinned by better information, simpler ticketing, and improved personal security."

SOUTH EAST

Kent's **Fastrack** BRT service linking Dartford and Greenhithe went live on Sunday, March 26.

Using £2.5 million of Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) funding, 14 new high specification buses are being built to run on Fastrack Route B.

Fitzpatrick Contractors Ltd started construction in September 2004 on the £7 million contract.

The Kent Thameside area has the potential to deliver 30,000 new homes and 50,000 new jobs over the next 20 years.

Fastrack Phase 1 will provide a dedicated public transport route between Dartford and Greenhithe. This will be known as Fastrack Route B.

Fastrack on track from last Sunday (March 26)

Roadworks

M1 Derbyshire
Between 2100 and 0600 until April 8: Exit slip road closed due to roadworks on M1 Northbound at J29 A617 / A6175 (Chesterfield / Mansfield)

M1 Hertfordshire
March 20 to December 31 2008: Speed restriction of 40 mph and narrow lanes on M1 both ways between J6A M25 and J10 M1 (Luton Airport).

M11 Cambridgeshire
Until May 1: Speed restriction 40mph resurfacing work and contraflow on M11 both ways between J9 A11 (Newmarket Turnoff) and J8 A120 / A1250 / B1256 (Stansted Airport / Bishops Stortford).

M4 South Gloucestershire
Between 2100 and 0530 until April 27: Roadworks at night and barrier repairs on M4 both ways at J20 M5 (Almondsbury Interchange/M5).

M48 South Gloucestershire
Between 0930 and 1600 until April 30: Lane closed and speed restriction 40 mph due to roadworks on M48 both ways at J1 A403 / B4461 (Aust).

M56 Cheshire
Until April 30: Lane closed on exit slip road due to bridge maintenance work on M56 Westbound at J7 A556 (Bowdon).

M74 Hamilton
Until May 12: Contraflow and roadworks on M74 both ways at J5 A725 (Raith Interchange).

M8 Renfrewshire
Until May 10: Delays and slip road closed due to bridge maintenance work on M8 Westbound at J27 A741 (Arkleston).

M9 Linlithgow
Until April 17: One lane closed due to bridge maintenance work on M9 both ways between J3 A803 (Linlithgow) and J4 A801 (Lathallan).

A39 Somerset
Until May 21: Road closed both ways between B3135 and A37.

In association with
trafficlink
www.trafficlink.co.uk

Online service strikes accord with operators

Accor Hotels is reporting a positive response from coach operators to its Groups On Line programme that was launched at BTTF at the beginning of the month.

The system allows operators to go to *www.accorhotels.com* and check out availability and rates. Michael Stevens, Accor's director of global leisure sales, said: "I am pleased to report that the programme was accepted very well at BTTF and we are now starting to roll this out to all UK coach and group operators over the coming months.

"Early indications from the trade are very encouraging and there are a number of modifications to be carried out as we move through the year. By the end of 2006 it will be a fully online, live booking system capable of tracking all business and volumes. Groups On Line will also show all Accor Group special offers."

The initiative was given an immediate endorsement from Eiron Jones, of Majestic Tours. He said: "This is a great system. To have at your fingertips live availability online, together with rates, gives you the ability to quote to your clients in a matter of seconds. It also allows you to view the hotels and print a map for driver reference."

Chris Blythe, of Action Europe, said: "It easy to use and makes our job much easier."

Neil Fletcher, of The UK Holiday Group, added: "This is just what the trade needs for speed, availability and the choice of hotels on offer."

Groups on line: Michael Stephens (right) at BTTF with Jeremy Pinnock, group sales director of Coachholidays.com

Fast track flight groups through immigration

All travellers, be they individuals or in a group, suffer frustration when they are held up by the queues at passport and immigration controls at airports. So incoming operators will be pleased to learn details of a free immigration service for groups at Heathrow terminals 3 and 4.

While many coach companies only supply the transport element of the group handling while working for tour operators, downtime is at a premium so operators will be pleased to be reminded of a fast-track service that should reduce the time it takes for incoming groups to pass through UK immigration controls.

The Group Travel scheme is a free service from the UK Immigration Service and its research claims that it can reduce waiting time by up to 90%. A study conducted by UK airlines revealed that up to 10% of travellers to the UK arrive in groups, yet only 2% of them use the scheme.

It works by having a separate designated area in the immigration arrivals hall, where passengers in a group are allocated their own immigration officer. This makes it easier for groups to clear immigration. Last year 200,000 passengers used the scheme. It does not mean that groups bypass any controls, it is just that they are processed quicker, thereby enabling them to meet up with their appointed coach without any unnecessary delays.

Any passengers travelling together may use the scheme and groups may be informed of its existence by the travel agent. On arrival they use the high-visibility area that is signposted Group Travel in the Immigration Hall. If there is a group leader, he or she can be the one questioned by the immigration officer. Then only the leader needs to complete a landing card for the group, thereby saving even more time.

Travel agents can give clients Invitation Cards with their tickets, which inform clients on how to use this upgrading. The format and wording of such cards will first need to be agreed with the UK Immigration Service.

Travel groups do not need to contact the port of entry prior to starting their journey to the UK. However, coach companies should be able to ease the passage of groups by distributing copies of an explanatory leaflet to tour agencies booking their services for arriving non-EU passengers.

■ More information is available by contacting Heathrow Terminal 3 on 0208 745 6900 or Terminal 4 on 0208 745 4700.

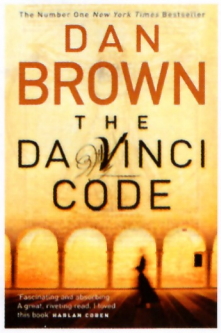
Heathrow's fast track system should cut down on your waiting times

Take steps to crack the code

The interest generated by The Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown's blockbuster, shows no signs of abating. The film of the novel is scheduled to be released in May, judgement in the High Court plagiarism trial permitting, but fans who cannot wait can sign up for a new offer from the Big Bus Company.

It has launched a Da Vinci Code Walk on which an expert guide takes visitors on a stroll around some of the key areas in London that link to the book. It takes up to two hours and will be launched on April 1 and runs throughout the summer to September 30.

Walks will depart daily at 1pm from Trafalgar Square bus stop, just outside The National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing.



For those few people who do not know the plot, it advances the theory that Jesus Christ married and his progeny can be traced to the kings of France, whose secrets are guarded by a society of the great and good down the ages.

The walk takes in the Strand for a discussion on ley lines before visiting the 12th century Temple church, which was one of the many locations visited by both Robert Langdon and the albino monk on their quest to unravel the mystery.

A short bus ride is then taken to Westminster Abbey before going on to St James's Park and finishing back in Trafalgar Square.

The Da Vinci Code Walk is a timely addition to the four guided, themed walks already included in the price of a Big Bus ticket – Movie Location, the Beatles Walk, The Royal London and Ghosts by Gaslight.

The price of a standard Big Bus ticket costs £20 per adult (£18 if you book online at www.bigbustours.com) and £10 per child and are valid for 24-hours on three London routes. Or, purchase a London Walking Pass, which covers all the walks and lasts for two days. The cost is £12 per adult and £6 per child. Tickets can be purchased from uniformed staff at Trafalgar Square at any time between 9.00am and 4.30pm.

■ To book, call 020 7233 7797 or log onto *www.bigbustours.com*. Tickets are also available when boarding a tour or in advance from The Big Bus Information Centre in Buckingham Palace Road, Victoria.

CT2006 countdown

Operators should make sure that they pre-register for Coach Tourism 2006, which is being held at Stoneleigh Park, in Warwickshire, on Wednesday and Thursday, May 17 and 18.

The show has rapidly established itself as a key venue for operators to meet suppliers, hotel chains and wholesalers. More than 80 exhibitors will be in attendance and there will be a free seminar programme over the two days.

The opening night will see an inaugural awards evening at Coventry City's Ricoh Arena, which will comprise 14 awards, a dinner and cabaret with Bobby Davro as special guest.

Coach Tourism 2006 is organized in conjunction with the British Association of Wholesale Tour Agents (BAWTA). Sean Taggart, the chairman of BAWTA, said: "The show is a veritable two-day festival of coach tourism and many operators realise its importance. In addition, the introduction of the awards will add a new dimension to what is already a prestigious event."

The show is open from 10am to 5pm on the Wednesday and until 4pm on the Thursday.

■ Admission is free and operators may pre-register for the show by going to *www.coachtourism.com/registration*. Tickets for the awards dinner may be booked by downloading a form from *www.coachtourismawards.com* or calling Haley Easterlow on 0870 389 2903.

Whole and hearty: face-to-face business at last year's Coach Tourism show

Just the ticket

A string of big musical arrivals in the West End seems to be proving just the ticket for operators. LHTS, the London specialist, is reporting an overwhelming demand for anticipated blockbusters and has increased its allocation of tickets to all performances for four of the latest shows to hit the West End.

The eagerly anticipated shows are **Evita**, which opens in June, **Wicked**, which opens in September, and **Dirty Dancing** and **Monty Python's Spamalot**, both of which open in October. LHTS has increased its allocation of tickets to all performances.

■ For more information call Rachel at LHTS on 020 7233 5322 or e-mail *rachel@lhts.com*

Events

■ April 4: London Transport Awards Dinner, London Hilton. 01224 263134

■ April 5: Getting Active, Getting There – making the links between transport and health. Conference. Bull Hotel, Peterborough. *conferences@landor.co.uk*, 0845 270 7965

■ April 6-7: 30th UK Transport Conference and Exhibition: 'Wasted Miles, Wasted Money'. University of Nottingham. 01223 881622 or *annchapman@CICC-conferences.org.uk*

■ April 7-9: Coach Tourism Council/ Bonded Coach Holidays Conference 2006, Llandudno, North Wales. 0870 850 2839 or email *admin@coachtourismcouncil.co.uk*

■ April 22-23: UK Coach Rally, Brighton, 01753 631170

■ April 24-26: CPT Scotland Annual Conference, Gleneagles. Gail Hume 0131 272 2150, email: *gailhume@cpt-uk.freeserve.co.uk*

■ April 25/27: CV Show, NEC, Birmingham. *www.cvshow.com*

■ May 4: Employee Motivation and Incentives, conference, CBI Conference Centre, London. *www.symposium-events.co.uk*

■ May 8-10: ALBUM Conference, Cardiff. Karen Stafford-Smith 029 2078 7700.

■ May 9-13: Motortec automotive show, IFEMA, Madrid, Spain. *www.motorteconline.com*, +34 91 722 3000

■ May 11: DDA 2005 and Public Transport: Myth and Reality, conference, Sadlers Wells, London. Book online at *www.thewaterfront.co.uk*

■ May 17-18: Coach Tourism 2006, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire. *www.coachtourism.com*, 0870 3892903

Scania's secret weapon

Bioethanol is not a fuel of the future, it's the fuel of the moment. Coincident with the opening of the first UK commercial filling point - and the Chancellor's announcement of a 100% tax break for suppliers building refineries - the BioAlcohol Fuel Foundation (BAFF) held a conference on Bioethanol at London's Imperial College last week. Andrew Peace went along to find out more.

Reducing emissions is one thing but bioethanol and its dieseling equivalent biodiesel offer the market carbon-neutrality.

What does that mean? Fossil fuel oils release carbon locked up in the ground millions of years ago, tilting the balance of carbon in the atmosphere. Carbon released from biofuels was itself only relatively recently gathered by plants from the atmosphere, so an engine is only putting back carbon that was recently taken out.

With stiff Kyoto targets to achieve, the government seems set to favour these alternative fuels, which can be manufactured from a huge variety of vegetable material.

The London event, organised by BAFF, but heavily supported by Scania, saw a borrowed OmniLink Ethanol service bus from Stockholm operator SL showing that bioethanol is very practical.

In the keynote speech, Urban Johansson, Scania's senior VP of Powertrain Development said: "Ethanol is an excellent renewable fuel for heavy commercial vehicles in urban operation, producing remarkable environmental benefits. By sustainable public transport we mean sustainable from an environmental and economic perspective. As long as we can use fuels that are compatible with current engine technology, we can use them for a gradual transition into alternative fuels, ensuring that the technology is sustainable as well."

SL has 600 Scania ethanol buses in service on mainly inner-city routes in the Swedish capital, and has been operating them for over 15 years. Recent oil price rises have made ethanol buses cheaper in service in Stockholm than their diesel counterparts for the first time.

The engine in the showpiece vehicle was built in 1987, but conformed even then to the Euro IV standard, without any modification. The next generation is due on the market next year when Euro V compliance is anticipated. TFL has recently had the bus for evaluation and trials are also on-going in Madrid, Slupsk in Poland and La Spezia, Italy.

The British government is taking an increasing interest in bioethanol and government agencies were well represented at the conference. Delegates heard that Tony Blair visited Brazil in early March, where the technology has been in use for 30 years, a trip that resulted in a bioethanol technology-transfer agreement; and about a county-wide public sector trial undertaken in Somerset, where bioethanol was made commercially available for the first time just two days before the conference.

Aaron Berry from the DfT, though, sounded a note of caution over the true carbon savings represented by bioethanol fuel - its so-called 'well-to-wheel' costs - which, according to him, range from 7% to 77%, depending on the source.

Bioethanol can be derived from a variety of feedstocks, not just the traditional sugar crops. The Swedes are perfecting a cellulose - wood - based manufacturing technique and aim to develop it to industrial proportions in the next few years.

It is the lack of a volume supply of bioethanol that prevents its more widespread adoption, a subject that occupied much of the rest of the conference. Barbara Hammond from the Office of Science and Technology, a UK DfT agency, revealed large-scale plans to produce the fuel in southern Africa - thereby addressing that continent's economic crisis as well as the world's environmental one.

The UK is also planning to home-grow the fuel - the UK Budget, announced the same day, gave a 100% tax break for

Above: A Stockholm-based OmniLink ethanol-fueled bus was on hand to demonstrate the practicalities. Above left: Scania UK's Geoff Bell (seated) and Urban Johansson

companies building biofuel refineries. Wessex Grain subsidiary Greenspirit Fuels is building a refinery in Somerset, due to come on stream in 2008, which will produce 110,000 tonnes of bioethanol. British Sugar is also building a smaller-scale facility in Norfolk that will produce 15,000t, or 70m litres, a year when it goes live in 2007.

The total annual market for road fuel in the UK is around 500bn litres. British Sugar's new opportunity manager, Tony Sidwell, told the conference that British farmers are ready to supply enough of the feedstock to satisfy the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation (RTFO) announced last December. The RTFO, which puts the onus on the suppliers of fuel rather than the consumers, was further clarified in the Budget - 2.5% of total UK production should come from renewable sources by 2008-09, ramping up to 5% in 2010-11.

The ethanol-fueled bus is entirely conventional in operation

In operation

A demonstration run proved that the OmniLink Ethanol is no different from its diesel stablemates. As Scania GB's driver trainer, Steve Dunk – who picked it up off the ferry from Gothenburg and drove it to London – says: "If the driver didn't know it was ethanol they wouldn't be able to tell. Performance and noise levels are exactly the same."

The power unit is a modified diesel engine – 9 litre, inline six cylinder, 230bhp – which will run on ethanol as long as the fuel contains an ignition improver. The differences between diesel and ethanol engines are limited to a higher compression ratio (18:1 to 28:1), larger fuel injection nozzles, altered injection timing, uprated gaskets and filters, due to the corrosive properties of ethanol, and larger fuel tanks, because of its lower energy content. Scania is the only ethanol bus manufacturer in the world.

The model currently carries a £10,000 premium over the diesel version – SL says it is just as reliable in service, but with different servicing requirements are . It needs oil changes twice as frequently, and more regular servicing on the fuel delivery system.

Despite the larger fuel tanks, the interior layout is entirely conventional, as is the placement of the fuel filler cap.

BEST and BAFF

One of the driving forces behind bioethanol is the BEST project (BioEthanol for Sustainable Transport), a project initiated by public transport representatives from Stockholm and now partly-funded by the EU. The objective is to prepare for large-scale acceptance of ethanol as a good alternative fuel both for passenger cars and for heavy vehicles. As a first step, a number of ethanol filling stations are being set up across Europe. Research will be initiated to develop common standards both for the quality and for the use of the fuel. BEST is behind the Somerset bioalcohol trial, where the county council is buying Ford Focus flexi-fuel cars for use by council employees, and refuelling them from the UK's first bioethanol garage, at a local Morrison's supermarket.

BAFF emerged from the Swedish Ethanol Development Foundation established in 1983 with the aim of developing bio-based ethanol technologies, as well as production. BAFF is active on a global level.

Scania hybrid technology

Scania is also working on a flexible fuel hybrid-drive concept. Using a normal bus engine means that the concept can be adapted to run on diesel, ethanol, RME or gas. This engine is coupled to a generator that supplies electricity to a motor that doubles as a generator when braking. Energy is stored in industrial ultracapacitors with higher power density and higher efficiency than existing batteries. The potential fuel saving is 25% or more, with correspondingly lower emissions. Scania is building the first prototype now, with the first products expected to reach the market in five years.

A Coach Company was ruled to be a phoenix application in November

Traffic commissioner Brigadier Tom Macartney

New Rush application given rough ride

Traffic commissioner not convinced by pair's latest bid

Andrew Jarosz, northern correspondent

Brother and sister partnership John Rush and Margaret Gray faced another tough grilling by North Eastern Area traffic commissioner Brigadier Tom Macartney, when they returned to Hillcrest House, Leeds last week, with an application for a new standard national licence authorising two vehicles.

The application in the name of John Rush, trading as J Rush Coach Hire, would have Mrs Gray as transport manager, and be based at Brenkley Yard, Brenkley Way, Blezzard Business Park, Seaton Burn, Newcastle upon Tyne. Both faced an uphill struggle as Brigadier Macartney expressed his displeasure at the applicant's history, and reserved his decision.

Both are disqualified directors of the Rush Travel company, having been disqualified from office for six months from January 2005 (*CBW*, January 6, 2005), after a public inquiry held in December 2004, and then indefinitely in April 2005 after a second public inquiry (*CBW*, April 14, 2005) and a failed appeal to the Transport Tribunal.

Rush Travel had its licence revoked on both occasions, but because the company had lodged an appeal against its first conviction, it had been granted a stay of execution to continue operating pending that appeal.

After appearing at public inquiries in January 2003 and May 2004, Rush Travel had faced its third public inquiry - held in December 2004, where the operator was then found to have lost its repute, with the licence being revoked in view of prohibition notices having been issued, convictions sustained and failure to comply with undertakings and a licence condition. Both the company and its directors had been disqualified from holding or obtaining an operators licence for a period of six months with effect from January 31, 2005 and any application to increase its three licence authorisation, by an associated company - RTL Travel and Tours had to be considered at a public inquiry.

A fourth public inquiry held in March 2005 found that the company had failed to heed earlier warnings and inquiries, failed to employ a transport manager, failed to comply with conditions specifically imposed on the licence to ensure that any football work carried out would be in a fashion which would be safe for the general public, and that finances had not received the attention promised. At this stage, both directors, had their disqualification extended indefinitely. During the autumn, Rush Travel was placed in administration.

Later last year, moves to replace Rush Travel, started with an application by a former Rush Travel driver for a five-vehicle operators licence. Steve Hyson, who operated 'A Coach Company (NE)' as a brokerage without an operators licence, from the former Rush Travel premises, was accused by VOSA of making a phoenix application (*CBW*, November 11, 2005). The traffic commissioner refused the application.

What the operator said:

Both Mr Rush and Mrs Gray came to the public inquiry without legal representation, and they presented their case and were cross-examined directly by the traffic commissioner. Nobody was present to oppose the application.

Presenting his case, Mr Rush said that he really wanted to get back into the coach industry, because it was all he had ever known and done. "I know that I have made lots of mistakes, but I'd like a chance to put them right," he said. Explaining that he was putting his hands up to all that had gone before, Mr Rush said that last time, he had grown his business too fast. "I was too hands on, and a lot of things went wrong. I admit that," he added. Answering a question from the traffic commissioner, he said that he wanted to try his hand with two vehicles on school contracts and a little bit of private hire, if it was available.

What the traffic commissioner said:

Recapping over the past Brigadier Macartney said that he had refreshed himself with details of previous inquiries. He said that at the inquiry in January 2003, the two directors had given undertakings that they would have personal hands-on control. At the public inquiry in May 2004, Rush Travel had all sorts of problems and its repute was tarnished, and at the inquiry in December 2004, a whole list of things came up including a list of convictions, drivers not doing walk-round checks, there was no transport manager, problems with football work and some vehicles were extremely dangerous.

"I remember that the transport tribunal said that the traffic commissioner was not slamming the door on you, and then, to my astonishment, the same problems came up again. I remember the last inquiry where police officers from Manchester, Liverpool and Northumbria were here and all gave evidence against the company."

Rush Travel went into administration in the autumn

The traffic commissioner then reminded Mrs Gray that her company had operated without a transport manager (for continental work). "You must accept that your repute is an issue. I appreciate that you want to put all this behind you, but I have serious reservations about you being a transport manager, because you had no control over your drivers."

Turning to the operations of A Coach Company, the commissioner asked who supplied coaches and drivers. Mrs Gray said that RTL Travel supplied coaches to A Coach Company and Rush Travel supplied drivers, until it went into administration. She said the plan to own coaches and hire them out did not work out, but claimed the finance company in Leeds had asked her brother John to make sure that the vehicles were being looked after and being maintained.

"Mr Hyson told me the A Coach Company application wasn't a phoenix for Rush Travel, but I did not believe him," said Brigadier Macartney. "Is there anything you can say to persuade me that it wasn't a phoenix for Rush Travel?" he asked. Mrs Gray said she wasn't there to be involved.

"But as I understood it, you were involved on site," replied the commissioner.

"We were not providing every vehicle - they were available to other operators," she replied.

"But one of your vehicles that was observed at one of the schools was A967 SYE, and it was driven by Mr Alexander Von Klaveren, whose operating centre is at Harry Lauder Street in Edinburgh. How could you control him?" asked Brigadier Macartney. "You have an awful track record. How can you convince me - given that you seem to have manipulated things after you lost your licence?" he concluded.

Finally the traffic commissioner examined financial information and said he was dissatisfied that credit card overdraft limits were being counted into the financial summary. The inquiry then went in *camera* to discuss other financial details.

Concluding the inquiry, Brigadier Macartney said he had discussed the finances in detail, and could not accept available funds on credit cards, but he did accept there were other funds. The commissioner closed the inquiry by reserving his decision, which would be communicated by letter in due course.

Key points

- **Both applicants are disqualified directors of the Rush Travel company, having been disqualified from office for six months from January 2005 after a public inquiry held in December 2004, and then indefinitely in April 2005 after a second public inquiry**
- **Mr Rush told the public inquiry he wanted to get back into the coach industry and admitted he had made mistakes in the past**
- **The inquiry was closed for the traffic commissioner to consider his decision**

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By Anonymous

Group functions? Get an expert in...

Formal dinners: Too expensive for most operators?

So IKEA has been knocked off the top of the list of most popular places to shop. No surprise there, I would rather spend an afternoon cleaning coach toilets than in the inescapable maze of Sweden's finest. What really surprises me is that it achieved that position in the first place - but then I am allergic to shopping.

And yet, an entrepreneur has won the franchise to sell his services at IKEA stores, he comes into your home to put the flatpack together. So I get an afternoon on the golf course and the furniture is put together, as if by magic. It would seem we Brits have lost our love of DIY and would rather pay to GAEI (Get An Expert In).

In the old days you did it all yourself, and certainly did not waste hard-earned money on 'experts' who do nothing but find out things you could find out for yourself.

While I do not know how to write software, run a website or fix a computer, and I have no intention of running a print shop, I am very good at despatching those who offer 25% discount on my phone bills and 30% on utility bills. Not to mention saving me money on business rates and, for a fee, finding grants to which I am entitled.

Perhaps the CPT should take note.

Professional associations have the time, resources and ability to do so many things. Operators are busy people who rightly spend their time doing what they do best, then look to experts for support in other areas Some time ago we had a coach involved in an accident. As the driver and a number of passengers were being taken away in ambulances I was comforted to know the CPT was there to guide me through the whole experience. Their wisdom, knowledge and support is invaluable.

I believe that without the efforts of the CPT the London Congestion Charges would have been levied on tourist coaches and parking in the capital and other cities would be much worse.

Although I am often frustrated and loudly proclaim that CPT should do more about... well... just about everything, I do understand that its softly, softly approach has the ears of politicians and civil servants, and suspect that without that, things would be very much worse.

On the social side the CPT arranges a number of business-cum-social events. This opportunity to network with others, to share thoughts and ideas is good for my sanity. Dinner discussion evenings and local area annual dinners usually involve good company and interesting speakers and serve excellent food at a reasonable price.

This is my message to the CPT: many, no, most of your members represent small independent coach companies. We join the CPT for much more than the emergency support, we join to be part of an organisation that sees the world from our point of view, helps fight our battles and offers a chance for us to be part of what is going on.

On occasions we feel excluded. We are not rolling in money and certainly cannot justify to the accountant or the tax man massive expenditure on quasi social events. An annual dinner, should be a bit like the office Christmas party with everyone welcome. £100 per person? Many small operators are not willing to spend that much.

Personally I find the food at the large London hotels to be indifferent and grossly overpriced. With the organisation managing to find so many excellent venues for other events why not look to this experience and expertise for the annual dinner?

An expertise widely available amongst the CPT's membership is that of organising continental short breaks - your members include operators and wholesalers for whom this is their stock in trade.

For example, Eurolines offers return travel to Holland from £30 and accommodation from as little as £34.25 per night. February half term for an educational visit - I would have given you a coach, for the cost of the fuel. I firmly believe, get the price right and you'll fill the coach. I am sure that many more of us would be happy to join your study tours if we felt the price was right.

Don't stop running these events, just remember that to GAEI gives you the time to do what you do best.

If there's a burning issue you want to get off your chest, write to Open Platform, CBW, 3 The Office Village, Cygnet Park, Hampton, Peterborough PE7 8FD or e-mail *cbwinbox@rouncymedia.co.uk*

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE...

Chris Grayling interview –

We talk to the shadow transport secretary about Tory transport policy...

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

In reply to Robin Littlewood's Open Platform (CBW, March 22), agents are a necessary evil in all commercial activities, especially the fringe who are unlicensed and unaccountable. They can operate a mobile phone with email and fax facility and have very little capital outlay but usually have excellent cash flow from collecting debts up front and paying creditors in arrears.

However, agents can work freely because coach operators and botchers wait for the phone to ring rather than promoting their own services in advance. Where coach operators are willing to put in the effort, by administering and organising events and tours, they can provide a far more competent service and gain a rate for the sub-contractor which is more realistic than an agent who has not the expertise in operating coaches or buses.

I have worked for really top-class coach operators who are capable of advanced planning on a large scale. Who, although they may be regional and have a small fleet, deliver one-off excellent customer service by hiring in, yet maintain the identity of the operation as coach industry not agency.

The industry lacks confidence and self-belief. We need to trust and build up relationships with other operators who, although in competition, face the same daily, weekly and monthly problems. The coach industry can learn from agents, but if we work together we cut out the need for customers to use their services, except in extreme circumstances.

Yes there is a price to pay if the industry continues to lay back and let agents dictate rates – a smaller poorer coach and bus industry.

Richard Godson Godsons Coaches, Leeds

WIN A BUS! Sort of... Drop us a line and if your letter is chosen as our Letter of the Week, you'll receive a top-notch coach or bus model courtesy of our friends at Corgi. Please try to keep your letters under 200 words. The editor's decision is final.

We offer CRB too

According to your article on Buzzlines (*CBW*, March 1) they are "the only company which will appear on the official CRB website as a company which is able to take in other company's forms". I dispute this. We have been an umbrella body for the CRB since March 2002, and are listed as such on the CRB website.

As an umbrella body we are able to process disclosures on behalf of people that need them.
I help people to complete the forms, and carry out the document checks before signing them off and posting to the CRB.

We can carry out this service to anyone who requires it (except for people who are self-employed as they are not allowed to ask themselves the 'exempted questions' under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, but I can give advice to these people).
I have been carrying out this service since 2003 for businesses as diverse as builders and children's homes.

Deborah Skinner Skinners of Oxted, Surrey

Modernised, at last

I particularly enjoyed this week's issue of *CBW* (March 22). You appear to have achieved the move into the modern world of coaching.

Specifically, 'Boost your Business' was excellent. It was great to see such a broad and informative discussion of the options and packed with common sense.

Great to see the return of Q&A. And the styling of the Meet... interview page... please don't change that.

I was pleased to see next week offers a discussion on biofuels, except I needed it last week! How about a discussion/explanation of all matters environmental, not just biofuels but EGR vs SCR, low carbon vs lowering particulates, Kyoto vs TfL, the meaning of Euro's I to V, why and how the industry is to achieve these?

Even some facts and figures on diesel vs petrol emissions. I feel the need to get up to speed on these various issues and I can find nothing that pulls all the threads together.

Sue Reynolds Reynolds Diplomat, Watford

***CBW* editor Mark Williams says: Thanks for the bouquets, and for the brickbats!**

5 YEARS AGO London United bus engineers belonging to the TGWU started strike action over the sacking of local convener Godfrey 'Abbey' Aberdeen

10 YEARS AGO A public inquiry heard that Weybus drivers in Weymouth were 'frightened for their lives' during competition with Southern National

20 YEARS AGO London-based coach tour operator Glenton Tours played host to 30 top-ranking Australian travel agents. The party enjoyed a five day tour of the West Country on a luxury coach

March 29 in history:

1943 Former PM John Major born, as is former Python Eric Idle
1973 US forces withdraw from Vietnam
1980 Tony Blair marries Cherie Booth
1981 First London Marathon held

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page 18
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page 30
Sprinter
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THIS MONTH

CVI Eurocity
- a viable lowfloor
pages 6-7

Star Treka
UV Modular's new Mercedes-based 24-seater ready to roll
pages 14-16

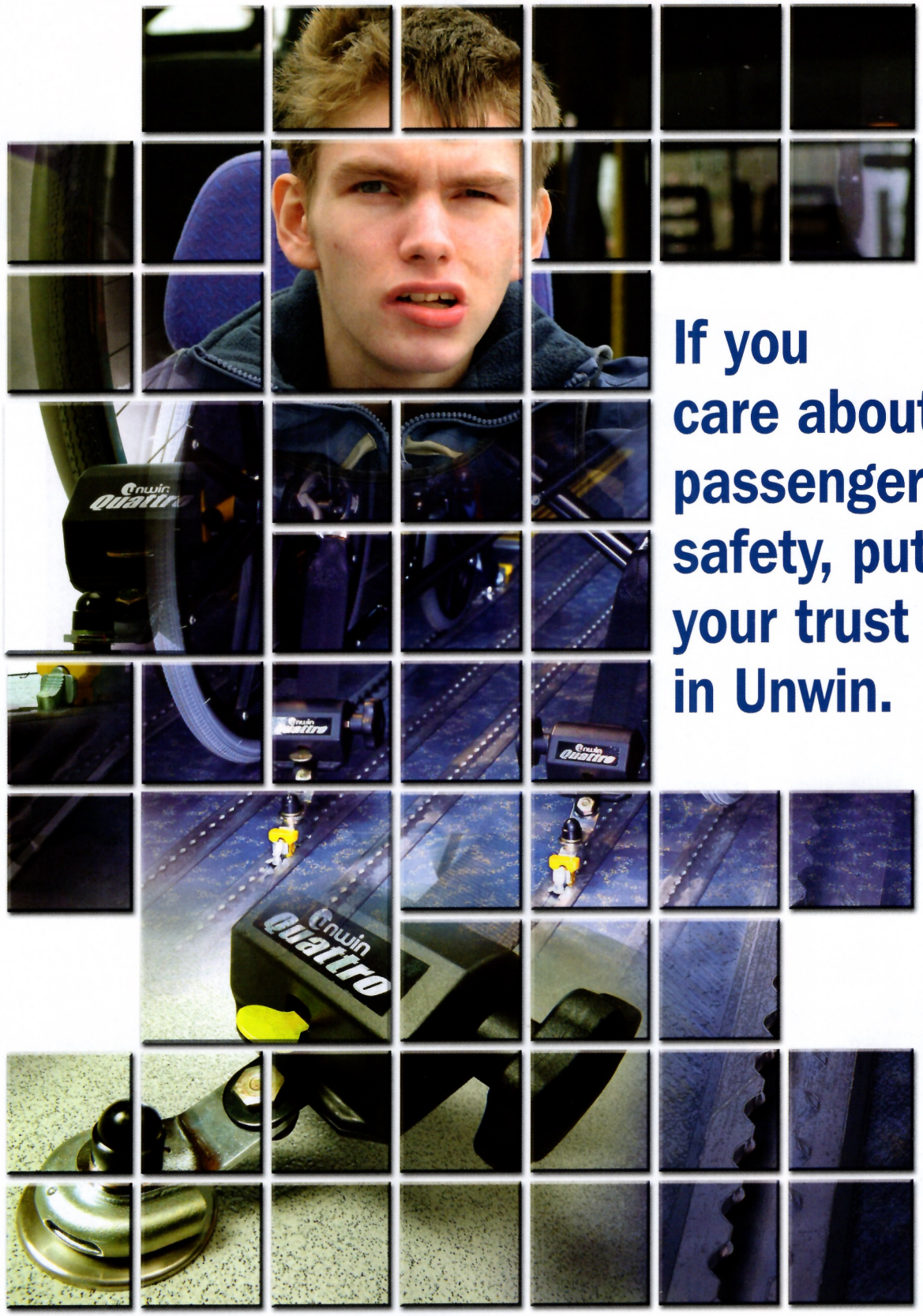
CV show
Preview page 17

Regulars

News	5
Products	18
Deliveries	18

New Sprinter from the ground up

Minibus travels to Vienna for the launch of the high-tech Mercedes Sprinter pages 8-13



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This week

It all starts from here

New minibus activity has never known such heights, and the choice is good for everyone.

First we had the announcements of the new Ford Transit, LDV Maxus, VW Crafter and Mercedes Sprinter - then we have new Renault products along with Master derivatives from Vauxhall and Nissan and the updating of the Peugeot Boxer and its Citroen and Fiat versions. Iveco will have changes to its Daily range and it could well be that BMC will be bringing a minibus to the market to compliment its new van range.

Sadly, we are seeing the end of the six-tonne Sprinter 616 but at least the new range has been extended to include a 5.0 tonne version. Rumours have it that the new model will have a 5.2 or perhaps even 5.5 tonne GVW - although it's close to the 616, it will lose some payload and bodies developed for the old platform will need revising anyway because the rear axle is narrower.

One major benefit of the new Mercedes range is that six-speed automatic gearboxes will be widely available across the range - potentially easing problems for those operating in dense urban traffic, making it easier to get drivers and reducing maintenance costs from worn-out clutches.

Now the launches have begun with the new Sprinter being premiered to the press in Vienna. In April we get the latest Renault Master developments and the official press launch of the Ford Transit - so there's plenty to write about for some time yet.

Buoyant market

Official statistics suggest the number of new minibus registrations has dwindled and then, more recently, shown signs of improvement. A number of producers I've spoken to don't put much credence behind this statement as they all claim they are extremely busy and have full order books for some months ahead.

However, those using coachbuilt vehicles may find there is a problem with supply of chassis cabs or cowls later this year. One bodybuilder told me his company was ordering a sizeable number of Euro III Mercedes Vario 814s as a safeguard, because there seemed to be some confusion as to when production volumes of Euro IV models would be high enough to sustain demand. If you are considering a Mercedes coachbuilt on a Euro III Vario chassis this year, make sure you get your order confirmed early. Bank stocks may will be depleted, and new Euro IV chassis in very short supply.

Martin Cole
Editor

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Q'STRAINT

Council orders seven from John Dennis

John Dennis Coachbuilders (JDC) has announced the first order for its new minibus, the JDC Advantage.

The order is for at least seven vehicles for Hertfordshire County Council and follows a successful framework agreement tendering process, carried out under strict guidelines.

The vehicles are due for delivery in September. They will be based on Iveco 50 C 14 chassis with 15 seats and a mixture of PLS & Ratcliff Palfinger wheelchair passenger lifts. At least one of the vehicles will be fitted with the Iveco 'Agile' automatic gearbox.

Alan McClafferty, managing director of JDC says: "We are, of course, delighted to have received this order so soon after the launch of the vehicle and I would like to thank Hertfordshire County Council for their support.

"We acknowledge that we did not get it 100% right at the launch at the CTA last November. Potential customers pointed out their dislike of certain features such as our step arrangement. We took on board all the comments and immediately reworked the areas as required. This has improved our offering enormously."

Alan Smith, Fleet Manager for Hertfordshire County Council commented "Although JDC are new to this sector we were able to take into account their solid financial performance over their 20-year history and their excellent track record in supplying and supporting fire vehicles to Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Service over the last 14 years.

"We trialled the 'JDC Advantage' prototype and compared it to a number of other manufacturers products and found it to be outstanding. We took feedback from our drivers, carers, maintenance staff and customers and it was very well received by every group."

Under the terms of the framework agreement, JDC are appointed as suppliers of Welfare Ambulance Bodies for all vehicles weighing under six tonnes for a period of two years.

Third top-level departure in LDV shake-up

Keith Stanton has become the third senior executive director to leave LDV since the Birmingham manufacturer underwent a £75 million rescue via Sun Capital Partners, an American private equity group.

Stanton had been enticed to join LDV after he revitalised Ford's Transit production operation in Southampton. His tenure as director of global purchasing and business improvement lasted little more than six months.

Stanton's exit follows a month after long-standing chief executive Allan Amey, former Midlands Businessman of the Year, parted company with the new owners. He had been tipped as a possible successor to the CEO.

Earlier, manufacturing director Alan Lines left the company. Lines had been lured into joining LDV from Case New Holland - where he worked at the Chicago HQ of the agricultural and construction manufacturer. He had only been with LDV since September.

Sun Capital has ended production of Convoy and Pilot at Washwood Heath to concentrate on developing new models in the Maxus range and gearing up production. Currently Maxus lines are turning out 200 vans per week and some seven new models are scheduled to appear at the CV Show in April. Despite this, 240 staff are being shed as part of a redundancy programme, cutting the employee total to somewhere between 600 and 700 people.

Taxibus drivers get 'the knowledge'

Drivers working for the Chelmsford-based taxi and bus operator, Group Taxibus Ltd, have been given the opportunity to enrol on an NVQ in Passenger Transport.

Funding made available by the Learning and Skills Council has enabled the initial course to cater to 20 drivers. It covers aspects such as customer service, disability awareness, safety and licensing regulations. The drivers are assessed while at work and from evidence they provide - reinforcing the training they have received. It is hoped further funding will enable the remaining 130 drivers to benefit from the same level of training.

David Prior, operations director, said: "We consider the provision of training to be as important as the investment in vehicles. This training further reinforces our position in the marketplace."

It is believed that Taxibus are the only operators in Essex currently undergoing this training. Anne Howes, from ABA training, is running the course for Group Taxibus. She told *Minibus*: Since the course started we have been approached by many other operators who want to do the same thing."

Taxibus is confident all its candidates will pass with flying colours.

■ Details from Anne Howes, ABA Training Ltd. Tel: 01277 654172 or mobile 07802 646520.

Taxibus drivers are heading towards an NVQ with new training

Eurocity's new lowfloor option

Martin Cole takes a look at CVI's well-bred lowfloor minibus

Imported into the UK to cater for the specialist lowfloor minibus market, the CVI Eurocity is direct competition for the EvoBus lowfloor Sprinter and also comes with a coachbuilt pedigree from VDL subsidiary Kusters.

The sole distribution of the Eurocity, and other Kusters products, has been taken on by the John Clarke Motor Group which formed an Edinburgh-based outlet, Commercial Vehicle Innovation (CVI), as its marketing arm. The distributorship became official in 2005 and for two years prior to that the formal agreement was for CVI to act as an agency.

Sales operations manager Mark Whittaker currently has an office at the premises of Frank Guy in Holmewood, Derbyshire. Two demonstrators for potential buyers to experience are based at the premises and any homologation work required on the Kusters vehicles is carried out by Frank Guy on behalf of CVI.

John Clarke also plays a very active role in the development of CVI and is keen to see it move forwards. He has already built up a strong network of vehicle dealerships with franchises for BMW and Audi cars and Volkswagen commercial vehicles - and he is determined to achieve similar success in the specialist minibus market.

Eurocity is, for the time being, offered on two platforms - the Volkswagen LT46 or the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 416. Both come with automatic gearboxes and offer a single-step entrance on to a flat floor with the majority of fixed passenger seating on the raised rear saloon section. Accessed by two shallow steps from the lowfloor section it can accommodate 10 seats - two rows of two-plus-one seats and four across the rear.

Each side of the lowfloor saloon is equipped with three tip-up and fold-out seats to cater for passengers in wheelchairs or parents with buggies. Seating is by Vogel - typically well finished, sturdy and attractive.

Between the last rows of seats on the offside is an emergency exit. The

Eurocity's interior is very nicely finished and the Vogel seats are both attractive and comfortable

TECH SPEC

Base vehicle: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 416 or Volkswagen LT46
Gearbox: automatic
Seating: maximum 16 - Vogel
Step height: 320mm
Price: £58,000
Contact: Mark Whittaker 07979 807909

door is large and fully compliant with requirements but a lack of seating space means access to the exit is somewhat restricted.

The passenger entrance is generous and easy boarding for wheelchairs or infirm passengers is via a manual bi-fold ramp. This is easily accessed from outside the vehicle and simply forms a bridge with the pavement, or opens out further to become a shallow ramp from ground level to the saloon entrance. Initial step height from the ground is around 320mm.

The lowfloor centre section is built and attached by Kusters. It extends the overall length of vehicle by lengthening the wheelbase and avoiding the creation of excessive rear overhang.

Eurocity is very nicely finished, and adequately reflects the quality one would expect from a major coachbuilder - especially one with Bova, Berkhof and Jonckheere in the same stable.

Setting CVI slightly apart from other suppliers is its insistence on customers sourcing their chosen chassis through their local dealerships. These dealers place the order with the manufacturer and the product is shipped directly from the factory to Kusters. The work is carried out and the finished product is shipped to the UK and delivered by the local dealer.

Notable sales of Eurocity include a batch of 10 to Europcar at Heathrow Airport, 20 to Glasgow City Council, six to GMPTE and four to Bristol Community Transport.

CVI is also hopeful of picking up a fair percentage of the orders it is currently tendering for but is prevented from naming the buyers until the deals are signed.

On the road

Eurocity retains virtually all the characteristics one would expect of the standard minibus although the centre of gravity is lowered and the lowfloor centre section means care has to be exercised when negotiating speed humps or ramps. If it is to be operated in an area where these are prolific and present a regular problem, a body raising kit can be installed to lift the ride height.

Proprietry air suspension systems from TVAC or Glide-Rite can be installed as optional extras but few customers call for them. Only two have chosen to go this route since the model was introduced in 2004.

Ride quality in the standard sprung version is remarkably good anyway. Although passenger legroom is somewhat restricted the Vogel seats compensate by being very firm and comfortable. The least appealing seats are those immediately over the rear wheel arches where the raised floor tends to lift the passengers' knees a bit too high for sustained comfort on longer journeys.

CBW was given the opportunity to try a Mercedes Sprinter-based demonstrator and found it to be a highly competent performer - given the right operating conditions.

The automatic gearbox means it its very easy to drive and in combination with the 109bhp engine was a very good performer. It could keep up with most traffic in an urban environment and the motor makes sensible use of the gear ratios making acceleration acceptably smooth if not totally seamless.

The whole structure feels very taut and the handling and steering characteristics are exemplary, inspiring confidence and giving a great deal of driver satisfaction.

Few additional buttons or switches have been added to the control layout. The most obvious difference is the control unit for the Webasto heating system. The switches for interior lighting - which include a setting for soft blue light for night-time illumination - appear to be standard items. Only the legend on the door open/close switch is confusing as it carries symbols for lock/unlock.

The space next to the driver normally occupied by a cab dual seat is neatly converted into a spacious luggage pen. This is, no doubt a very welcome addition as there are no overhead parcel racks and space for shopping bags or luggage is a bit limited.

MERCEDES-BENZ SPRINTER

Sprinter sets the pace

One of the world's best vans is set to become even better. *CBW*'s Minibus editor Martin Cole travels to Austria to try out the new Mercedes-Benz Sprinter

If you liked the old Sprinter you're going to love this one.

We've heard quite a lot about the new Mercedes-Benz Sprinter this year, but it was officially launched, in a ride and drive form, to the press in Austria last week. Everyone there was keen to get their hands on the new model and I suspect none were disappointed.

The new development carries a distinct resemblance to its predecessor and clearly shows its heritage, but it is a world apart in terms of driver comfort, ride quality, passive and active safety, and basic specification level.

Complete with its range of new Euro IV compliant engines, six speed manual and five speed automatic gearboxes, wheelbases, gross weight capacities, roof heights and chassis cab variants there will be over 1,000 variants of Sprinter available through dealers - not to mention those independent coachbuilders and converters who will also add to the mix.

With such a successful model, one could argue why there was a need to change it, but DaimlerChrysler's policy recognises standing still means falling behind and there were concerns others were catching up or surpassing the Sprinter. The move to a new model also sits well with legislational changes imposed on vehicle builders. Driven by the requirement to provide low emission Euro IV engines from October 2006, the timing coincides nicely and introduces all the new developments at one time.

Sampling the Sprinter's Park-tronic manoeuvring aid. Below: Rear view camera aids reversing. Bottom: Sturdy door opener

Safety and handling

Although completely restyled, Sprinter retains the form and function necessary to perform its tasks adequately. However, the new design briefs added a lot to the overall safety package and much has been done to improve the integrity of the structure to maximise passenger protection.

A much-improved crumple-zone at the front will absorb considerable impact while the passenger cell is much stronger and the body has more resistance to deformation in an accident - particularly with roll-over protection. A driver's airbag is standard but buyers can also opt for a side airbag for the passenger or for a double thorax airbag if a dual seat is specified alongside the driver.

Ride and handling have been given a major boost thanks to a much stronger front axle, new anti-roll bars, revised wishbones and larger flexible bushings with greater lateral movement. Suspension units are adjustable for both damping and rebound on the top plate of the vertical struts. A new transverse leaf spring, reinforced with GRP, is employed.

The rear axle is wider and stronger than previously, a new anti-roll bar design incorporated and, again, larger flexible bushings are used. In addition to aiding a smother ride they also contribute considerably to noise reduction.

Braking has been totally revised with the employment of new discs and twin-piston callipers which contribute in no small way the Sprinter's amazingly short stopping distance. The feel of the brake pedal is now completely altered and the spongy feeling always associated with previous Sprinters is now gone.

Naturally the system employs ABS antilock EBV brake force distribution and BAS hydraulic brake assist along with other functions which combine and work together with the new Adaptive ESP system, which is yet another leap forwards in controlling the handling dynamics of a vehicle. Adaptive ESP is the next generation of controller and it works by adding in another calculation for the system to process when it is monitoring vehicle stability 200 times per second. Now the system can cater for a change in load distribution - where, in a panel van, it could mean the load has shifted because it has not been adequately restrained, whereas in a minibus situation it could mean passengers have moved around inside the saloon.

ESP now locates the centre of gravity and its position co-ordinates are relayed to the controller and computed along with everything else relating to stability and dynamics. ESP then, if called upon, acts by controlling braking pressure to individual wheels, bringing the vehicle back under control

Above: Rear doors can open to 270° on all minibuses. Right: Exceptional comfort and equipment levels set new standards. Below: Mirror incorporates lights, a wide-angle viewing element and new reversing aids. Bottom: Steering wheel buttons control dashboard functions.

and reducing or eliminating the tendency to go into a skid.

The new control software for the ESP system includes 44 separate programmes designed to cater for most applications. What operators will need to be careful of is buying a vehicle with the system set completely wrong for the application. Dealerships will be able to select and activate the correct one. But if a basic panel van is acquired, and later converted into a minicoach, which will carry its weight high up and may have overhead parcel racks, TV/video systems, additional lighting, loudspeakers and roof-mounted air conditioning adding to the new centre of gravity, it could prevent the ESP from working optimally.

A new option on the 4.6-tonne models setting Sprinter apart is a world first in the adoption of 285/65 R16 C super-single tyres on the rear axle in place of twin rear wheels. This reduces the unsprung weight while giving the opportunity for far less wheel arch intrusion into the load area or saloon. Super singles also reduce rolling resistance.

Standard H7 halogen headlights can be upgraded by an optional bi-xenon 'Add-Light' system which not only throws a wider and more illuminating beam, it also allows the headlamp angle to turn and, to a limited extent, follow the direction the wheels are pointing in.

For those operating in restricted spaces where manoeuvrability and careful control is called for, the new Park-tronic system is likely to be a real benefit. This option

uses strategically placed ultrasonic sensors front and rear and they combine with a rear view camera to give the driver audible warnings of when the vehicle is close to an obstacle. The audible beeps are a different tone for easy differentiation of front or back. The dash houses a bank of coloured LEDs which show yellow as an obstacle is detected close by. The closer the vehicle gets the more lights come on and progress towards the centre of the display, accompanied by faster beeping, where the last few spaces house red LEDs and the beep tone becomes constant.

The reversing camera is a real bonus for drivers with deleted rear windows and it has low light capability for operating in the dark. To assist drivers reversing when using their mirrors, there are yellow and red LEDs embedded in the mirror body and these show up similar to a 'Head Up Display' on the mirror face. They work in the same way as forward sensors where the beep also becomes faster as the object approaches.

Engines

The range is covered by two diesel engines and one petrol engine providing six output ratings from 65 kW (88 hp) to 190 kW (258 hp). All the diesel engines meet Euro IV low emissions ratings and are fitted with particulate filters.

Four output ratings are provided by a new 2.148-litre OM 646 DE 22 LA diesel engine, delivering 65 kW (88 hp), ›

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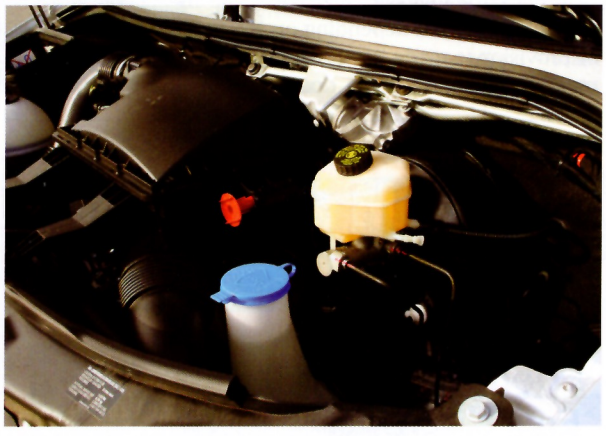
80 kW (109 hp), 95 kW (129 hp) and 110 kW (150 hp). All produce more power and torque than their predecessors. The entry-level 65 kW (88 hp) version develops 220 Nm and the most powerful version develops 330 Nm - more than the five-cylinder unit in the current range. Peak torque is developed between 1200 and 2400 rpm, creating high flexibility.

The OM 646 features aluminium four-valve cylinder heads, twin overhead hollow-cast camshafts with duplex timing chain, intercooled, turbocharging, third-generation common-rail injection technology running at 1600 bar combined with seven-hole piezoelectric injectors for optimised combustion, fuel economy and emissions. Up to four injections are performed per compression stroke. They comprise two pilot injections for a smooth increase in cylinder pressure, the main injection and now also a post injection, for improved emissions performance.

The two most powerful variants are equipped with two-stage turbocharging. Two turbochargers of differing size are mounted one behind the other in series. At low engine speeds, turbocharging is performed only by the smaller, fast-responding turbocharger, while the larger turbocharger simply idles. At medium engine speeds, both turbochargers are active, the large turbocharger providing initial compression and the small turbocharger final compression.



Above: Ride, handling and stability are vastly improved. Left: New four cylinder engines meet Euro IV. Below: Fuel filler remains in the usual place. Bottom: Alloy wheels now optional

Boost pressure is controlled by a turbine bypass with a boost pressure control valve. At high engine speeds only the large turbocharger is active, while the smaller turbocharger is bypassed. The system provides rapid boost pressure increase even at low rpm - improving low-end torque and response.

In the EU IV/III-rated 80 kW (109 hp) and 110 kW (150 hp) versions, and in the EU IV-rated 80 kW (109 hp) version, VNT turbocharging is used.

A sophisticated engine management system contains a number of new functions. It can read signals from the crankshaft position sensor and detect uneven running due to unequal cylinder performance. This is automatically rectified by adjusting the injection quantities at the relevant injectors.

The new three-litre OM 642 DE 30 LA V6 diesel engine, which will be launched in summer 2006, has a maximum output of 135 kW (184 hp) and maximum torque of 400 Nm at 1600-2500rpm.

This long-stroke engine (bore x stroke: 83 x 92 mm) has already been proven in Mercedes-Benz car application. It features a lightweight aluminium crankcase and weighs just 240 kg. Its 30-degree crankpin offset and balancer shaft between the cylinder banks ensures smooth power delivery.

Already long service intervals of 30,000km have been extended to 40,000km - or every two years. With the aid of an ASSYST maintenance computer it may be possible to extend the oil change period by a further 10,000km.

The final option, a V6 petrol engine, is available but is intended primarily for NAFTA markets where fuel prices are lower.

It is the M 272 V6 petrol engine from the Mercedes-Benz SLK sports car. The 3.5 litre unit delivers a maximum output of 190 kW (258 hp) at 5750 rpm and maximum torque of 340 Nm at 3750-5000 rpm.

Gearboxes

All diesel models feature a manual six-speed transmission as standard. They come in two versions, catering for different engines, final-drive ratios and permissible gross vehicle weights. Thus, they provide differing torque-carrying capacity and individual gear ratios are matched to the specific vehicle. Multi-cone synchromesh for easier shifting and lower stress is used on the lower gears. Reverse gear is also synchromesh and a PTO connection for equipment such as tipper platforms is provided.

SprintShift gearbox options have been dropped in favour of the fully automatic W5A 380 transmission derived from the Mercedes-Benz E Class. The five-speed automatic has well-spaced ratios, long service life and allows good fuel economy thanks to a torque converter lockup clutch which engages in all forward gears. The driver can limit the shift range manually by nudging the selector lever to the right or left (plus/minus) - a benefit on downhill gradients, in order to take advantage of engine braking.

Driving impression

The 315 Cdi Kombi (crewbus) with nine passenger seats was trimmed in a fabric material to soften the textured ABS mouldings and there were carpets in the driver and passenger footwell and over the centre floor panel, where the battery has been relocated.

The driver's seat is fully adjustable and (optional) hydraulically suspended with an armrest on either side. To ensure maximum comfort, the steering column features a tilt-and-slide mechanism. The feel is bordering on sumptuous ›

MERCEDES-BENZ SPRINTER

and has a great attraction for minibus operators. The new-style dash and centre console is also very attractive and many of the electronic functions built into the dashboard can be controlled from buttons on the steering wheel.

Lower side windows give improved vision of the pavement close to the vehicle, increasing the chances of seeing potential collisions with children attempting to cross the road as traffic moves off. Side mirrors give a good view either side and include wide-angle elements.

Improved sound dampening is a real bonus and the Sprinter is now the quietest vehicle of its type on the road - comparable with, or better than, a lot of passenger cars.

Acceleration is brisk and the gear ratios well-spaced. Changes using the joystick gearchange are also very light and smooth and in combination with the power delivery made the Sprinter very easy to control. Ample torque means the changes, once under way, don't have to be made frequently but it was noticeable that sixth gear tends to be more of an overdrive. Although response to more throttle was adequate on flat roads it often required dropping down to fifth to cope with uphill gradients.

Handling and stability are both excellent and although it certainly lets the driver know about gusty cross winds the Sprinter sticks to the road like glue and steers with pinpoint accuracy.

Brakes are extremely effective and under maximum emergency stop testing deliver deceleration of almost 1G. Under test, the vehicle, loaded with 800kg stopped in exactly the same impressively short distance as it did when unladen.

WE LIKED

- Seating and cab area
- Power delivery
- Handling

WE DISLIKED

- Over-geared sixth
- Not much else!

Equipment

Passenger seating in the Kombi is firm and comfortable and the seats are installed to M1 requirements and each equipped with lap-and-diagonal seatbelts.

The layout left a reasonable amount of space behind the rear seats for luggage. Stowage space in general is above average but varies depending on the model selected. Plenty of provision is made for the driver's own requirements with moulded recesses in the doors, spaces in the dash and a

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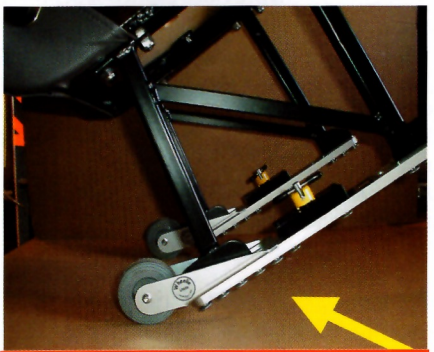

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Above: Centre console houses sat-nav, CD/DVD, mobile phone keypad, radio and has space for a CD changer. Left: Passenger seats are both attractive and supportive. Opposite: Adaptive ESP gives more control under difficult driving conditions

glove compartment.

Those selecting a high roofed version will automatically gain an overhead locker above the driver's compartment, although some may utilise this to mount a TV screen and associated electronic equipment as it is capable of carrying 30kg.

Radio CD players are standard in all models but there are four options in all. The three higher specification models include a mobile phone dock and pushbutton keypad and the top two feature satellite navigation systems. A CD changer unit can also be installed in the centre console. The highest specification system also includes a DVD player.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, space does not permit a full explanation or detailed assessment of the Sprinter's whole development but it has been thoroughly upgraded in every department and will be a tough act to follow.

Ford holds the market leading position for panel vans with its Transit and the new model is being released to the press next month - if the company wants to maintain its lead the new Transit will have to be very good indeed.

Prices are shortly to be announced for the Sprinter and they do hold increases, but these are roughly being pegged at 3.5%. With the added extras and high standard specification the new Sprinter offers significant value for money. Its five-tonne variant is sure to appeal to minicoach operators because of the extra load capacity.

TECH SPEC

Model: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, long wheelbase, high-roof 4.6-tonne
Price: Embargoed until April 1. M-B anticipate an average 3.5% increase on current models
Length: 6.945m
Width: 1.960m
Height: 2.815m
W/base: 4.325m
Weight: 2.49t
Payload: 2.11t
Engine: OM646 DE22LA four cylinder 2.148 litres
Power: 411Cdi 109bhp; 415Cdi 150bhp; **Torque:** 280Nm at 1600-2500 rpm; 330Nm at 1200-2400 rpm
Engine: OM642 DE30LA four cylinder 2.987 litres
Power: 418Cdi 184hp; **Torque:** 400Nm at 1600-2600 rpm
Fuel capacity: 75 litres
Gearbox: NSG 400-6 six speed manual or NAG WA5380 five-speed auto
Brakes: Dual circuit hydraulic system with vacuum booster, four ventilated discs, Adaptive ESP, ABS, ASR, BAS and EBV
Contact: Any Mercedes-Benz dealership

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UV's star Treka

Composites and lean production generate success for UV Modular

Martin Cole, Minibus editor

Six years ago UV Modular launched its first Treka minibus and created a stir among traditional vehicle builders.

The market was very interested in the concept - if a little slow to move initially - but perseverance and confidence in the product has gradually built up a comfortable momentum which has raised UV Modular to a leading position in the supply of 16-seat coachbuilt minibuses.

Utilising GRP moulded bodies supported by an aluminium substructure, the Treka offers clean lines, light weight and a corrosion-free package designed to give long service and maintain above average residual value. It has already found favour with many operations and won many repeat orders. The Dawsonrentals fleet includes around 180 Treka models and there is a similar number with London Hire.

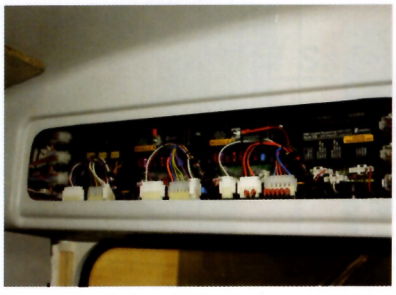
Aimed specifically at the community transport market, Treka was first available on Mercedes Sprinter and Volkswagen LT platforms but last year the range of base vehicles was extended to include the Ford Transit and Iveco Daily. The move only resulted in small orders of the new variants and although this wasn't as many as UV would have liked, it did add orders to the annual total and these were new customers who, presumably, would have bought elsewhere.

UV Modular introduced the composite build method primarily to produce ambulances - which remain the core business for the organisation. Based in Brighouse, next to Junction 25 of the M62 motorway, the factory currently turns out eight vans and three minibuses every week.

The build process is geared around the production of the modules and most of the sub assemblies are already completed by the time they get to the line. Roofs, doors and sidewalls are mounted around aluminium framing built on jigs in the factory. All the jigs are 'Go/No go' examples which means any component not fitting in exactly is either the wrong part or it has been cut and formed incorrectly. Standardised jigs also mean consistency and, for example, any rear door from a new Treka will be an exact fit in the respective aperture for an older model.

Side walls include a bonded coving panel where all the wiring looms and ducting for blown air or air conditioning are already installed in position. Similarly, roofs are put together with all the wiring, lighting and insulation so the whole assembly can be hoisted into place where it is bonded to the other components to form a rigid structure in conjunction with the framing.

With so much being accomplished away from the production line the actual build area seems very small and it is remarkably quiet and clean. The base vehicles are all bought in as chassis cabs and the unwanted cab portions removed on-site. UV Modular believes the chassis cowls are insufficiently protected from the weather following their production by the OEMs and the company prefers



Above left: A panel in the side wall is home to all the electronics from Intellitec

Not pretty, but pretty useful says the CT market

Any Treka rear door will fit any earlier model. Below: Supports and firmers brace the structure during the bonding process

to take cab units because they ensure protection against the elements while the unit is stood or being shipped.

Once the chassis are prepared and body mounting rails attached to the longitudinal members, the unit is moved along to the next station where the floor and body frame is added. The floors, tested to M2, utilise heavy duty Unwin tracking and include 10 separate tracks for maximum flexibility of seating layout or wheelchair accommodation.

Immediately the floor covering is laid it is covered over to protect it from dirt ingress, scuffing or gouging during any of the remaining build processes.

After the floor has cured the chassis is moved on again where it is chocked up and accurately levelled to ensure when the body is put in place it sits absolutely true. As the body comes together it is pressed against internal formers to align everything correctly and these are removed before the vehicle moves to its next stage.

When, as UVG, UV Modular began the composite structure forming, it was convinced the actual process along the lines should involve little other than an air drill and a screwdriver to complete each task – and that holds true today. The reason the factory is so quiet is because of a lack of hammering and cutting. It is like building a model kit and the absence of on-the-spot fabrications assists in keeping the working environment exceptionally clean. The lack of dust and dirt in the atmosphere means very little gets carried into the vehicles on the boots of the staff and they are far more presentable when they reach the end of the line than traditionally built vehicles.

Treka 24 was built with auto gearbox

Another benefit of using a composite structure is the ability to colour-impregnate the material so it requires no spraying, and most scuffs or scratches are difficult to see. Colour choice is quite extensive but relies on acceptance of British Standard shades. Pantones and other derivatives cannot be incorporated and therefore require a spray process to achieve.

The saloon structure can be fitted with gasket mounted windows or bonded glass – according to preference.

The window apertures remain the ›

Door interiors feature lighting strips for safety. Right: Seats mounted on Unwin tracking

Extra step for the ambulant

Fascia enhanced by wood-effect finish

Illuminated strips mark the gangway

same but the bonded glass is neatly recessed to lie flush with bodywork and is far more attractive than the gasket glazing option.

Eberspacher heating units are installed as standard and customers can opt for air conditioning with full climate control if they wish. The on-board electronics are all plug-and-play units from Intellitec with the control systems neatly housed in a locker above the driver's head.

Internally, Treka bodies lack a little of the softness normally associated with conventional coachbuilt bodies, but the ABS mouldings all have a textured surface so don't look quite as antiseptic as melamine. The demonstration model was fitted with a wood-effect vinyl dashboard kit which adds more warmth to the feel in the cab area. Operators using Treka in service have few criticisms of the interior as it is very resilient and easy to clean.

Production at Brighouse has undergone a few changes over recent months under the guidance of Andrew Hill - formerly with TransBus at Wigan. The new production manager has, so far, taken 50 hours out of the build process and is still looking to gain efficiencies where there is an opportunity. He said: "It really hasn't taken too much doing to create a more efficient flow. All I've had to do is tweak a few things."

The first Treka 24 was built to a high specification to advertise to potential customers just what could be achieved with a few basic extras - and to obtain a tilt certification with a full complement of options and accessories. The Vario 814D chassis was ordered with an automatic gearbox and air suspension, Eberspacher climate control system, bonded glazing, reversing camera and LED lighting strips set into the gangway floor and step edges to highlight the way out for those with failing vision.

LED warning strips are also set into the upper half of the rear doors, on the inside. This means when the doors are open and folded flat against the rear of the vehicle, they are plainly visible to other motorists and act as high-level safety repeater lights for the rear flashing indicators.

The Treka 24 has already been acquired by London Hire and will operate under a joint demonstration programme for the customer and the manufacturer until later in the year when it will be taken into London Hire's daily fleet operations. Another major customer for Treka 24 is Salford. The Greater Manchester operation has ordered 19 and another vehicle has been ordered by Dawsonrentals.

UV Modular's move to a larger platform has been welcomed by its customers. Most are keen to look at purchasing the 24-seater with around 16 seats installed to gain maximum flexibility and take advantage of the extra space to have generous comfort for each passenger. Despite this there have been calls for longer 27/33-seat vehicles and it is possible UV Modular will move towards developing a longer version with an extended underfame.

Sales manager Ken Goodson sees this as something worth considering but is not keen to rush headlong at it. He said there had been enquiries about producing 27-seaters with a coach-style interior and he felt this would address the needs of specialist carriers seeking to run fully accessible tour programmes.

He also said it would be worth having a look at producing a composite body for the lowfloor minibus market - if a suitable chassis could be sourced.

TECH SPEC

Base vehicle: Mercedes-Benz Vario O814D
Wheelbase: 4250mm
Chassis options: Air rear-only suspension or air all round, automatic gearbox
Body: Composite colour impregnated panels, aluminium frame
Seats: up to 24 removable units. Electric single-leaf entrance door
Tracking: Unwin heavy duty system – 10 rails; high level track mounting for passenger restraints
Heating: Eberspacher; Eberspacher air conditioning optional
Accessibility: Pull-down step at side entrance: PLS Access Powermatic passenger lift: Option on Ratcliff-Palfinger or Ricon
Price: Starting around £60,000 – dependent on specification
Contact: Ken Goodson 07788 145176

CV Show provides Euro IV launchpad

NEC event offers close-up look at latest models with new emissions technology

Irisbus will be showing one of its 16-seat Daily Start minibuses

Martin Cole, Minibus editor

Anyone seeking an early look at the latest developments in factory-produced minibuses and the implementation of Euro IV emissions on traditional van and chassis cab platforms should consider a visit to this year's Commercial Vehicle Show. Don't be put off by the fact it is a truck show - if you operate vehicles commercially there will be plenty to keep you interested - from hi-tech logistics to basic workshop equipment.

Held at the NEC in Birmingham from April 25-27 it heralds the first UK showing of the all-new Ford Transit, the brand new Mercedes-Benz Sprinter and Volkswagen Crafter - VW's latest incarnation of the Sprinter-based LT range. Not all van manufacturers will have Euro IV products ready by April and even those that have achieved it with some platforms are still waiting to finalise the changes on others.

The latest **Transit** promises a dash-mounted gear-change, higher comfort level, increased driver protection and a choice of seven new engine options - depending on the customer's choice of front or rear wheel drive. All but one are 2.2 or 2.4 litre diesel engines, the other runs on LPG.

Another first showing at Birmingham will be the **VW Crafter** which also comes with a raft of improvements and changes - not least of which is its radically different and outstanding frontal styling. It also offers a variety of lengths, heights and drivetrains.

Emphasising the importance of the UK market to DaimlerChrysler, which is the third-largest outlet for **Sprinters** in Europe, the manufacturer has chosen the CV Show as the venue for its European launch. (See pages 8-13).

The smaller **Vito** model has few physical alterations but comes with new engine options and a higher level of sound insulation thanks to increased dampening around the engine compartment bulkhead/firewall.

Using the 'No. 1 in Europe' theme, Renault is capitalising on its F1 Championship victory in 2005 and a prime draw on the stand is likely to be the latest F1 car - the R26. For those of us with something more fuel efficient in mind the **Trafic** and **Master** offer a more realistic form of transport.

Two new Master 16s and a nine-seat Trafic will represent Renault's new Commercial Passenger Vehicle (CPV) division and visitors will be the first in the UK to see CPV-produced vehicles.

LDV plans to introduce its own **Maxus**-based minibus. The ending of production of the Convoy at Drews Lane has allowed the business to concentrate on the project alongside development of chassis cab versions of Maxus.

Citroën continues to promote its Enterprise specification minibuses based on the **Relay**. Nine, 10, 11 and 12-seat versions are available on the Relay 1100 all at the same price of £12,995 plus VAT and delivery. Larger 15 and 17-seat version on the LWB high-roof Relay 1800 cost £16,995 plus VAT and delivery.

Vauxhall plans to display its **Movano** 15/17 seat minibus and its nine-seat **Vivaro**. Both provide off-the-shelf passenger transport with seating installed to M1 requirements and a choice of engines and transmissions. Accessible versions of both vehicles can be obtained but Vauxhall is not sure if they will join the show line-up.

Irisbus will have one of its 16-seat **Daily Start** minibuses on show on the Iveco stand. Start is the entry-level vehicle produced in the factory and finished in the UK by Bluebird Vehicles. Based on the 40C13 it features a 2.8 litre diesel engine and a six-speed manual gearbox. The total package is just under £20,000.

BMC's new **Megastar** van range will feature prominently this year and a new minibus version will join the line-up. Although a smaller example, boasting a Pininfarina design, was shown last year the new model is a 14-seater and in right-hand drive form.

Some coachbuilt minibus examples will be dotted around the show but the majority of unlisted exhibits will be found on the **Eberspacher** stand - displaying the capabilities of the company's heating, air conditioning and climate control systems.

■ Visitors can pre-book by visiting *www.cvshow.com* to obtain fast-track entry tickets and avoid the queues.

Renault's new CPV division will be displaying a 16-seat Master

Deliveries

Have you taken delivery of a new minibus and want to tell the world about it? Email all the details and pictures to *martin.cole@rouncymedia.co.uk* or write to the address on page 3

HIRE SOCIETY

Glasgow-based Hire Society, which specialises in executive and golfing tours, has upgraded its modern fleet with a new Esker Riada from Harry Ferguson Coach Sales.

Built on a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 616 chassis the Riada features 23 Kiel Advance reclining seats with moquette trim and leather headrest inserts, a carpeted gangway aisle, courier seat and electric plug-type entrance door. A total of 22 power supply units have been installed for personal audio or laptop computers and a 10-disc CD multichanger supports the on-board audio/PA system. Air conditioning and double glazing were also installed.

The acquisition of the Riada follows quickly after Hire Society purchased its first vehicle from Harry Ferguson Coach Sales in June 2005 - an Esker Cimo.

Hire Society's vehicles range from eight-seaters to a 33-seat Mercedes

Good boot size and luxury interior attracted Hire Society to the Esker Riada

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 616
Engine 616cdi Esker Riada
Transmission Manual
Seats 23
Spec Air con, double glazing, CD/PA
Bought from Harry Ferguson Coach Sales 01501 762266

Products

NEW LEDS GAINING POPULARITY

Kara & Jalmarit International has launched two new high performance LED lamps for vehicle builders and end-users in the UK and Ireland. Easy to install and with very low power usage, they provide excellent illumination and last many times longer than conventional 12 or 24 volt lighting.

KJ-J055LED is a round, super bright, 12 or 24 volt, nine-LED, ABS bodied, recessed down light lamp. Overall depth of the lamp is only 23 mm of which 16 mm is recessed – making them very easy to install flush with vehicle trim.

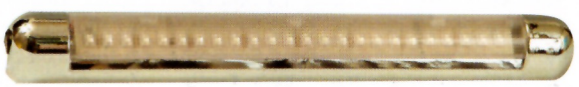
Fitting requires a 53 mm drill hole for the body leaving a 72mm flange with a height of just 7mm after installation. The units are easily secured with the simple spring clips supplied.

The KJ-J055LED is claimed to be an ideal replacement for halogen and incandescent type lamps as it draws very little current, offers very high brightness and long life. Importantly, the lamp does not get hot and is safe to touch.

The KJ-2708LED is a super bright rectangular 12 or 24 volt, 24 LED, easy to fix, surface-mount cabin interior light – suitable for replacing fluorescent strip lighting.

Dimensions are 390 mm long x 50 mm wide x 36 mm deep. Its construction includes a strong plastic ABS chromed base with diffuser and mini rocker switch on the end.

J - 2708 Fluorescent



J - 2708 LED

J - 055 Led White Mini dome light 12v

Technical details are as above, but current draw is 160 milliamps.

K&J say the main benefits in specifying and using LED include:

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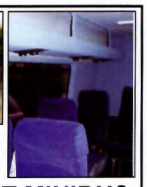

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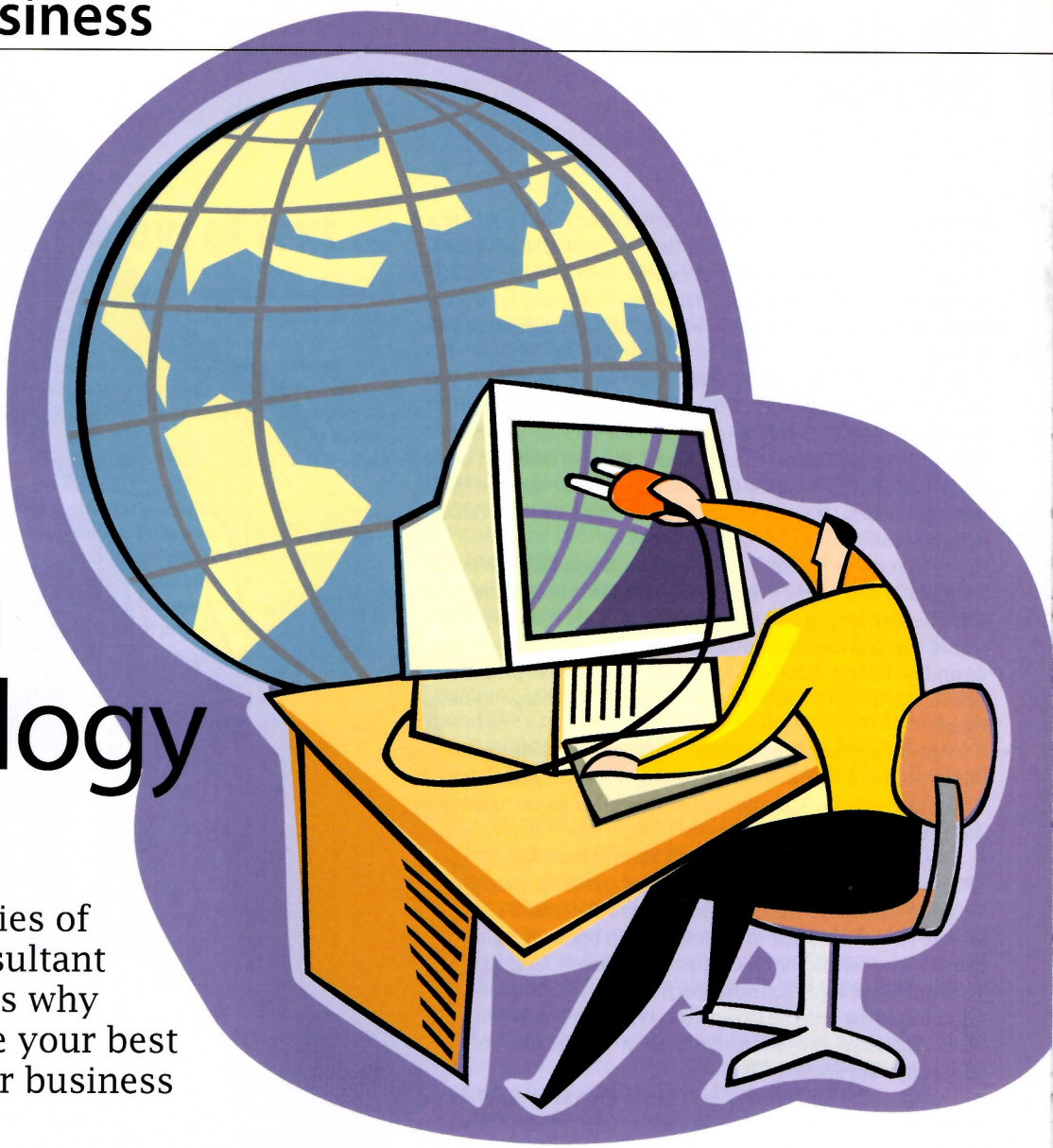
PART TWO



Making technology work

In the second in a series of three, marketing consultant Paul Clapham explains why your computer can be your best friend in running your business

We live in a hi-tech world. The development of technology-based solutions is a key reason why more and more small businesses can come to exist and grow successfully: the small business can afford, for example, the same computing power as a large multi-site competitor.

This applies in marketing just as it does in other areas. In fact, if you look at what the big boys do, technology is a focus of their marketing activities. What major company doesn't have a loyalty scheme built around a smart card? Everybody pushes their website at you. They're all trying to exploit SMS (short message service), ie text on mobile phones.

First, you shouldn't get twitchy about this. You are not getting left behind. There is a tendency in the big company marketing departments to get so excited about the communication potential technology offers that they forget it's the message that matters, not the delivery system. They're so busy hunting the Holy Grail of technological edge that they forget about the customer.

That customer doesn't like being processed by machines; he or she likes personal service. Even that most complete of government monopolies, the Passport Office, has recognised this and replaced technology with people for the first point of contact. A business in a competitive market can therefore assume its potential customers will go elsewhere if they don't like machine processing.

That said, most small businesses tend to miss opportunities by not exploiting what they already have available to them. In essence, this means the phone and the desktop computer and the possibilities each present.

Since every small business in the UK has a BT phone line, they should all be aware of what BT offers and few are. BT Business Services has a freephone line where you can get information - call 0800 328 9070 - and a sister website at *www.bt.com/business*. They also have a quarterly mailer called BT Business Catalogue and associated web pages at *www.bt.com/business/catalogue*.

I recommend you look at these. They give a summary of each facility and a variety of products. It's helpful and it's free. If you want to see the products and services in use you could visit one of BT's Showcase venues or a Business Events seminar.

It's a matter of personal preference, but amongst the various services my favourite is Calling Line Identity (CLID). This enables you to identify the caller before you answer. Linked to your customer database it ensures that you know detail about your caller.

Consider the quality of customer care inherent in this answer: "Johnson's Coaches. That's Mrs Smith isn't it? How was the trip to London?" Equally, knowing your caller is a headmaster and expects a businesslike approach gives you an edge to start a call. Personally, I always find this facility in use impressive and it speeds up a call. To make it work for you, recording detail on that database is a must.

BT Answer 1571 should be on everyone's shopping list, not least because it's free. Its key virtue over an answering machine is that it picks up messages when you are on the phone.

You can achieve the same result with that added ›

Boost your business

PART TWO

personal touch via Call Waiting which enables you to talk to a second caller whilst putting your first on hold. Call Diversion is worth considering as a way of extending your accessibility. Most bus and coach operators have fixed opening hours but diverting calls to your mobile or home phone means that you can be available, even if not open, all hours.

Quite possibly you don't want to be so available and you may well not perceive it as a problem. There's a way to be sure. Amongst BT's billing services is a facility to monitor inbound and outbound calls. It could tell you that you don't need Call Diversion because nobody phones outside your business hours. Or it could scare you to death with how many calls you miss.

BT of course doesn't have a monopoly of telecoms. Alternative providers - and there's no shortage of choice - offer flexible billing and the option to include mobile phones within the deal as well as other services you get from BT such as on-line billing. But the key benefit they offer is price. Fine, but that price position is based on volume of usage in most cases.

Most independent operators don't achieve a usage level which makes it worthwhile. So the big boys win again!

Not necessarily. The alternative providers come to market with far greater flexibility.

As a case in point, Kingston Communications offer an affinity group solution. Thus, coach operators could band together to achieve the bulk that attracts best rates. Kingston handle all the administration involved in retailers signing up for such a deal and bill each customer direct. To implement an affinity package requires a partner who will communicate and market the scheme to retailers, typically a major supplier to the industry - who is constantly in touch with potential users anyway.

The benefits for the retailer can be impressive. Kingston quote savings of up to 40% compared to BT standard rates. What's more that affinity group partner receives a revenue share of between 5% and 8% - which of course they could pass back to the member companies.

Work that PC

Then there's that computer sitting on your desk and not earning its full living. The first way to turn it into a moneyspinner is to develop a customer database. A programme like ACT! costs under £100 and is easy to learn and use. If you ask every customer for their details you will rapidly build a valuable sales tool. You want name, address, telephone number, mobile number and home e-mail address.

Present your database activity as a customer service - you might call it a club. Tell people you'll send them information on new destinations and special offers. Without a computerised database contacting the right customers with the best offers would be next door to impossible.

Once you've got that information, use it regularly but judiciously. Let's start with e-mail. The simple fact is that most people still like to receive e-mails as private individuals.

Certainly, you have to press the recipient's interest buttons very early, preferably in the 'subject' column, but once you've done that, it's so easy for him to hit reply and say: "OK tell me more".

He may just as likely say "no thanks", but that's valuable too - you don't waste more time and money on him.

Get the spelling right. Incorrect spelling says your attention to detail is poor – not the message you aimed to convey

Sending e-mails to clients or contacts, regularly updating them on new ideas, special offers, keen pricing and just information that your database tells you should be of interest is both easy to do and builds up a rapport and regular communication system. It's tempting to overdo it but resist that temptation.

The coach industry has, of course, specialist software systems available to it from the likes of Distinctive Systems and Roeville. These do have marketing functions but they are much more than that - they are complete operational packages, addressing everything from booking and ticketing to drivers' hours, servicing and fuel management.

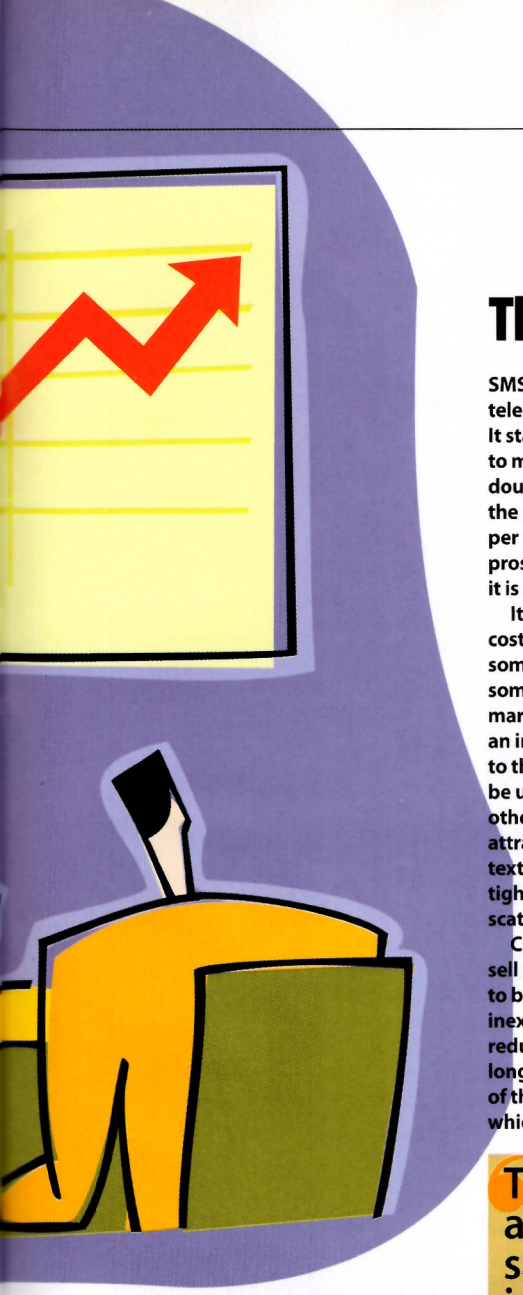
The broadband revolution

Broadband internet access enhances these possibilities ten fold. At the time of writing, penetration of the British market by broadband is low, but increasing rapidly, which is little wonder when you look at the possibilities.

Because it offers communication at 2.5 megabytes per second instead of 56k, suddenly you can realistically e-mail colour pictures, even video.

Better still, you can tailor-make what you send to people from a set of pages, so you don't waste clients' time or your money sending them irrelevant information. You can also personalise that content if you wish. This is a win-win situation for everyone except printers.

When broadband becomes the standard internet



The joys of text

SMS is where your computer meets the telephone, specifically the mobile phone. It stands for short message service - text to me and thee. It has been, without doubt, a marketing success story over the past two or three years. At roughly 5p per unit, it's cheap; it goes straight to the prospective customer; you can time when it is sent.

It also has weaknesses. That very low cost has attracted lots of text marketers, some of them distinctly dodgy. Whilst some mobile users like getting SMS marketing messages, others regard it as an intrusion of privacy. Those sending to third party lists of numbers need to be utterly certain they are pet owners otherwise it's a waste of money which will attract complaints and derision. Consider text to reach your own database with a tightly targeted message, but be wary of a scatter-gun approach.

Canny use of technology will help you sell more and make it easier for customers to buy. The services and hardware are inexpensive to buy and easy to use. They reduce costs as well as boosting sales. So long as you keep your focus on the needs of the customer, that's a combination which spells profit.

access default, which will be soon in businesses and not far behind in the home, sending words and pictures won't need the expensive and relatively slow involvement of a printer. You'll get your material designed and send it on demand as required. Updating will cost twopence ha'penny, too.

Until a reasonable proportion of your prospective customers have broadband access you might feel the £20 per month it costs could be better spent elsewhere. Fine, but keep an eye on this.

> "Trading without a website is the same as not being in Yellow Pages. Conversely, a well thought-out website can definitely be a business builder"

The wonders of the web

Those who aren't internet enthusiasts are probably heartily sick of being told to create or improve their website. But it's good advice. Trading without a website is the same as not being in Yellow Pages. Conversely, a well thought-out website can definitely be a business builder.

The key virtue of a website is that it can communicate a large amount of information at low cost. Especially if you aim to sell over the web it's an opportunity to list every destination and all planned travel dates. This can drive phone bookings and footfall at your office too.

Above all, use it to sell your areas of specialisation. Because the web has no geographic boundaries you can sell to anyone, anywhere. This is particularly true for inbound visitors to the UK, many of whom want specialised tours.

Paul Clapham is a marketing consultant with over 25 years experience, working with a wide range of businesses, on an even wider range of projects, both in the UK and overseas. He has run his own consultancy for the past nine years.

There are five key dos and don'ts for web marketing for the small business. First, make your site easy to navigate; if people can't find what they want, click, you're history. Second, keep your site current; dated website content is unforgiveable because updating is easy and customers expect latest information on a website. Third, make the tone and content appropriate to your customers; people don't turn into teenaged uber-nerds just because they've got a computer mouse in their hand. Fourth, make your site interesting but fast-running; this is tricky because the features that create interest (pictures and video) slow it down, but it's an important balancing act.

Finally, the bit that most businesses forget, publicise that website address... on coloured cards to hand out to customers, big and bold on depot-front, signage, stationery, advertising - and above all your vehicles.

Computer design

Designing your own brochures, leaflets and posters might sound like a big reach, but it's not so implausible. Indeed, you may find that a young staff member already has that skill, or could achieve it with a small amount of training at the local college.

The big difference between the real thing and the tatty amateur efforts you see everywhere is that the former is created, no surprise, by a trained and experienced designer. He gets proportions, pictures and typefaces right. He knows when to use upper or lower case, the best use of bold and italic lettering and so on. A small amount of training for you or that young staffer won't cost much and the difference will be dramatic. Trust me.

But you're probably going to do without to start with. So here are a few tips to make your signs and posters look more professional (or at least to avoid the worst sins).

1. Always use the same typeface, preferably the one in your logo.
2. Be consistent with colours. At any given moment all materials should be in the same colour combination.
3. Don't overdo colours. A background colour plus another for headline/price and black or dark blue for any detail copy should be the maximum.
4. Never use capitals throughout. People find caps harder to read. The exceptions are few: FREE, WIN, SAVE, NEW, SALE - all short words.
5. Don't overdo the variations in type-size: three at most.
6. Don't overstress with bold letters, italics, underlining and exclamation marks. Stress should drag the eye to just one or two words.
7. Keep it short and sweet - the detail should be left to "ask for details"
8. Spell it right. Incorrect spelling says your attention to detail is poor - not the message you want to convey.
9. Most people are lousy at punctuation. I suggest you avoid it. This applies especially to my personal hate, inverted commas. These don't stress, they merely imply that what you're saying may be untrue. Don't use them, ever. If you don't know when to use apostrophes, use none. It is definitely not before every final 's'.

Canny use of technology will help you sell more and make it easier for customers to buy. The services and hardware are inexpensive to buy and easy to use. They reduce costs as well as boosting sales.

So long as you keep your focus on the needs of the customer, that's a combination which spells profit.

MAN on a mission

NeoMAN MD Vince Welsh tells *CBW* editor Mark Williams the future is looking bright

Vince Welsh is looking pretty healthy the morning after the annual MAN editor's bash at which he had a starring role.

While the assembled truck hacks fiddled with the cutlery, Mr Welsh announced to the more attentive PCV journalists that 2006 marked a quantum leap in MAN sales. In 2005, the chassis builder's sales effort in the UK yielded barely 4% market share, but 2006 results so far suggest close to 10% of the bus chassis market is within his grasp.

The strategy which has yielded results is based on more and better relationships with everyone; whether body builder, major bus operator or MAN dealership. They were the solid foundations Mr Welsh announced last year, and it seems the brickwork of orders is slowly rising as a result.

"We now have 18 dealerships in the network," he said last week. "They used to have truck dealer standards, but now they have met the minimum standards for bus."

As the waiters laden with the first course were kept waiting in the corridor, Mr Welsh went on to explain how some serious talking had now got First and Arriva to sign supplier agreements, and MAN sold chassis into Northern Ireland's massive Translink operation for the first time. Admittedly they were 25 Ayats coaches for interurban express work, but a start is a start.

More impressively, Mr Welsh could reel off a long list of body builders who've now agreed to underpinning their buses with MAN chassis. Significantly for the coach industry, two other names surfaced - Plaxton and Beulas of Spain. By this time, the truck editors' stomachs were rumbling like an ERF tractor unit, and Mr Welsh stifled his enthusiasm so the beetroot tartlet could be served.

It was perhaps unsurprising that Mr Welsh, a sharp and talkative Scot, was in a good mood the following morning when we talked about the burgeoning list of alliances: "We've got an agreement with everyone in the bus market but Wrightbus," he said. "The first chassis into Plaxton for the Centro will be there by March 24, and we have 14-tonne and 18-tonne chassis being bodied by East Lancs. That vehicle will have a name.

"Seven Euro IIIs will be followed by the Euro IV in May on 18-tonne, and ELC will primarily be building double-deck by the end of September," he says.

He doesn't say so, but he clearly sees London as lacking further enthusiasm for bendies: "It's a priority to develop double-decks in 10.8 metres - a single-door, then a London special."

MCV is already producing its Evolution on MAN, and that partnership is set to blossom, says Mr Welsh. He's at a loss to understand why the superb MAN-based Marcopolo Viale single-deck didn't win many friends: "I was impressed with Viale, but it's not generating the interest I expected."

But that hasn't dented Mr Welsh's enthusiasm for the BASE team: "BASE was a big surprise.... Very demanding, but refreshing to work with. Ian Hall and the Aspinalls are very dynamic, and work very hard. If I can keep BASE happy, I can keep anyone happy," he says. Five 14-tonne chassis are there at present for bodying, and there's a continuing relationship on the coach front.

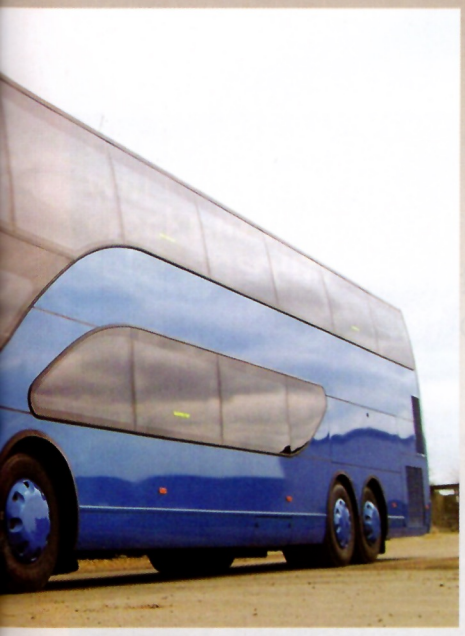
Coach chassis probably don't occupy all Mr Welsh's waking hours, but he's been busy sprinkling them through the market like fairydust. The big news is that Beulas has now allotted some of its rare production slots to MAN-based coaches, and Plaxton is busy developing not only a standard product, but an evaluation vehicle for National Express, complete with PLS Magic Floor lift for front wheelchair access. Not only that, but Mr Welsh is working on figures to give NatEx a 'per kilometre' lease price: "That's interesting - tricky, but interesting," he says.

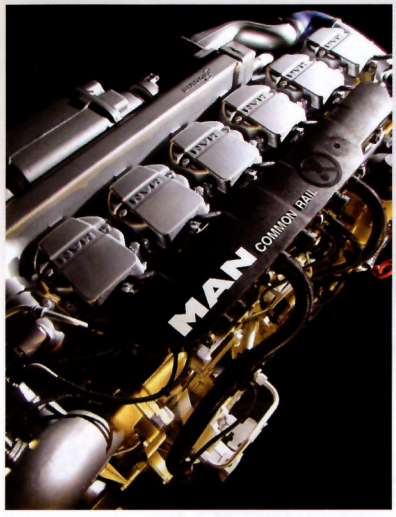
Among high-profile deliveries this year are the 25 Ayats Bravo double-decks with MAN chassis plying the Translink express routes.

It's plainly a source of slight irritation to Mr Welsh that Wrightbus remains almost uniquely unconquered territory among the bus builders, and

BASE was a big surprise... If I can keep them happy, I can keep anyone happy

Vince Welsh, NeoMAN Bus UK's managing director, explains why Ayats (above) sales to Translink are a breakthrough, where he's heading with MCV (below) and why the sale of 600 A69 chassis to Stagecoach (main picture) haven't led to more





that Translink - among many other big bus groups - hasn't placed big orders for MAN bus chassis. Yet in Stagecoach, there are 600 A69 chassis running around, delivering good service and at lower fuel consumption than many other products.

"Until now we've been seen as a wholesaler, not a retailer. We've been content to let other people retail our product, and that's seen us lose sight of our responsibilities. We've got to dip our toes in the pond," he says. This year, MAN will appoint a sales executive, whose sole aim will be to meet with the big bus companies and extol the virtues of MAN - widely held in the truck market as the best engineered machines in the business.

Last year MAN delivered 168 chassis, but 2006 will see at least 300: "I want to reach 400 this year," says Mr Welsh. "I think we might do it. Our market share is currently 9% of the bus market."

The key will be a two-pronged sales message. The first is that MAN is sticking with Exhaust Gas Recycling (EGR) as its method of meeting emissions regulations. That means no AdBlue to buy, stock and trust drivers to top up. The second message is service.

"EGR will be our big thing. It would be naïve to suggest the whole world's going to go the EGR route, but our feedback is that most operators favour EGR," he says.

On the service front, Mr Welsh has worked very hard getting the truck service centres up to speed with bus: "We made a big effort with the 18 dealerships we have. They are now bus dealers. We never convinced operators in the past with service. We can now."

Mr Welsh's PR man Simon Hall is hovering now, indicating unsubtly the queue of other journalists awaiting their turn for a half-hour with Mr Welsh, and as I tuck my pencil behind my ear I'm aware of the ground we've covered in almost no time at all.

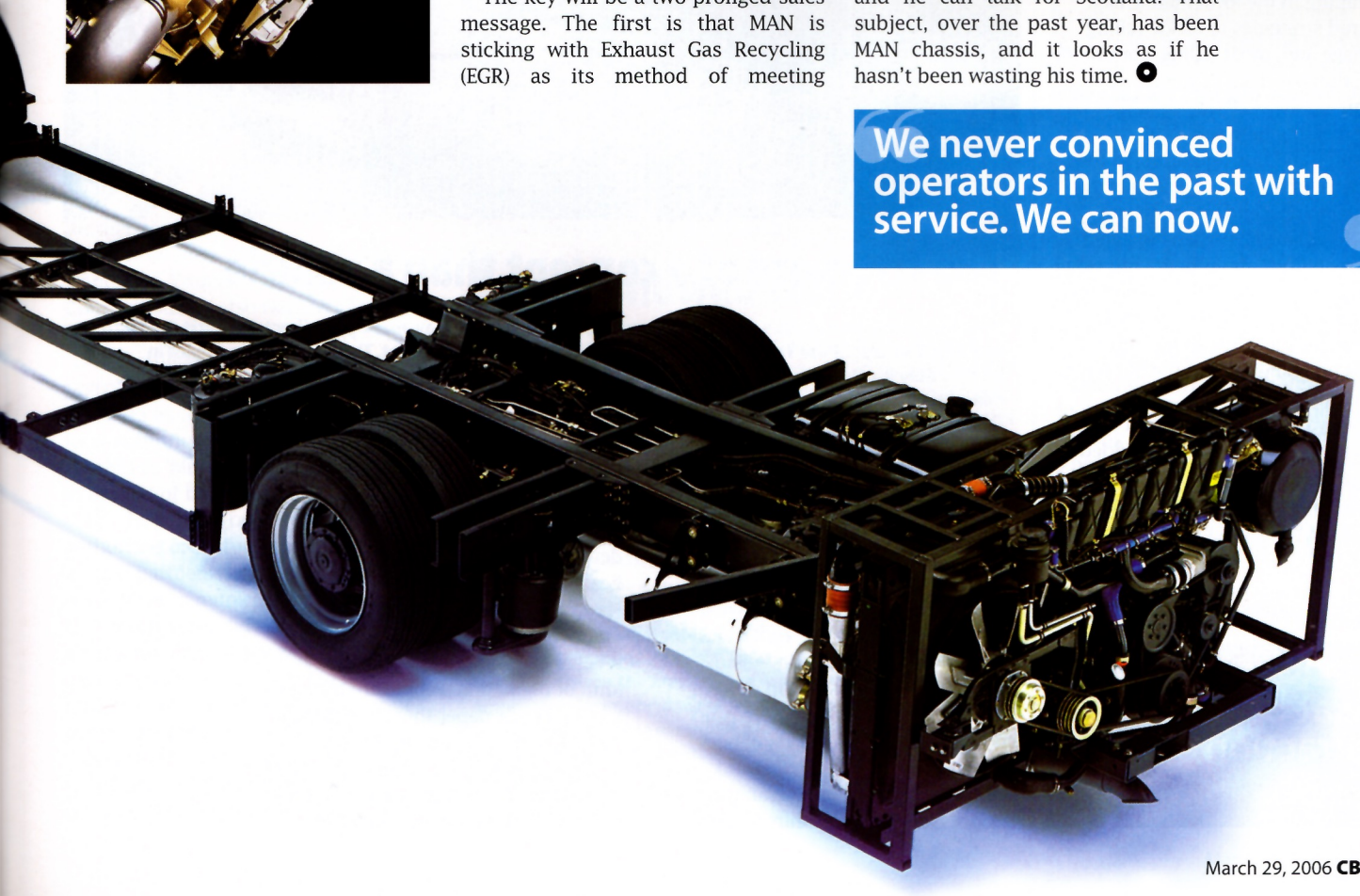
Get Vince Welsh on the right subject, and he can talk for Scotland. That subject, over the past year, has been MAN chassis, and it looks as if he hasn't been wasting his time. ●

MORE INFO

The MAN ERF website has a dealership locator for the whole of the UK and Ireland www.manerf.com

■ Details of Neoplan can be found at www.neoplan.co.uk

> **We never convinced operators in the past with service. We can now.**



Mending the rift

Partnerships between operators and local authorities are fragile. News editor Andrew Peace went to the North West Bus Forum to find out ways they could be strengthened, and heard both sides of the story

Nobody is saying that the North West is a battleground between operators and local authorities, but the North West Bus Commission thought it would be a good idea to get the two sides together and demonstrate the benefits of working in partnership. The result was the North West Bus Forum: a conference for all those in the area with an interest in thriving public transport services.

Virtually every aspect of the industry was represented at an event that attracted nearly 200 delegates and top line speakers. Clearly the NWBC had identified a real issue for operators and authorities alike.

As one speaker said, it is hard to argue against strong partnerships between operators and local authorities. But the evidence of it not working in practise is there for all to see: sniping in the local media, lack of shared strategies to tackle falling patronage and, most telling, continuing calls for an overhaul of the entire system.

Any meeting between local authorities and bus operators, in the north west or anywhere else, has the potential to descend into a debate about 'Regulation'. Perhaps to avoid this possibility, Labour peer Lord Hogg of Cumbernauld, the first speaker on the programme, outlined clearly the government's attitude to the subject: there is no going back to the old form of regulation.

"Quality contracts are at best a distraction - regulation never added an extra mile of bus lane," he said. "It is easy to say it works in London therefore it will work everywhere else, but I'm convinced London is a special case."

Traffic commissioner for the North West, Beverley Bell, while admitting that she has to be careful in making seemingly political statements, wondered whether London is a special case. Ben Colson, managing director of Norfolk Green - which has been growing ridership between 4% and 7% over the past five years - said: "Bus patronage has been in decline since before the 1980s. There is no correlation between the regulatory regime and patronage."

Basil Jackson, head of Transport Services at Cambridgeshire County Council - which has been growing services above target since 1999 - thinks that it is the difficulty in developing effective relationships that lies behind the calls for re-regulation. He said: "I get the feeling we give up on developing relationships because it is hard, and instead call for some kind of regulation. People are trying to put a piece of paper there and hope it develops the relationship for you."

The necessity of a formal agreement is evidence that things are not as they should be: "If you need a piece of

> **Quality contracts are at best a distraction**
> Lord Hogg

The ftr: more of a concept than a vehicle

"FTR isn't just a vehicle, it's a partnership project," says Jonathan May, managing director of First Bradford and First York about the 'ftr' bus the company brought along to the event. The ftr will enter service in York on May 8, after a short gestation period that has involved close partnership working between First, manufacturer Wright's and York City Council.

Bits of paper will not hide the cracks in the relationship

Mark Fowles, NCT

paper you've failed already," he said.

He was backed up by Mark Fowles, managing director of Nottingham City Transport - which has had five years of passenger growth - who said: "Bits of paper will not hide the cracks in the relationship. Don't add any more clauses, because they shouldn't be there in the first place."

Fowles presented several definitions of partnerships, from 'a voluntary, mutually-beneficial arrangement entered into for the purpose of accomplishing mutually-agreed upon objectives, to a relationship of good faith, mutual respect and understanding and shared decision making'. But settled on the tongue-in-cheek: 'The cessation of hostilities in the pursuit of profit or political success'.

The key to successful partnerships, he argues, is understanding why you want a partnership in the first place, what you expect to get out of it and then defining a vision and a mechanism for achieving it. He questions whether the accepted barriers to effective partnerships, like conflicting objectives, really exist and says that partners who do not trust, like or believe in each other would have more productive careers as Big Brother contestants!

Stuart Wrigley, director of Strategic Planning & Transport at Lancashire County Council, also warned about the dangers of personal conflict: "Don't underestimate the power of personalities," he said. He provided a variation on Mark Fowles' definition of local authority/ operator partnerships. He calls it: 'Mutual loathing suspended in pursuit of hard cash'.

But, he argued, operators and authorities are actually historic and natural partners, from the days when it was a municipal coat of arms that adorned the side of a bus, not a corporate logo. They worked well together until the 1985 Act failed to recognise the role that local authorities play in the provision of bus services.

He said this failure created an artificial distinction between commercial and social services, and that operators and local authorities have, and have always had, common objectives in growing ridership. He defined the local authority's role as, among other things, balancing conflicts, delivering political commitment and support, and ensuring consistency of policy.

Ben Colson said having defined roles in partnerships is key to making them work. "Where there is clear separation of responsibilities, you quickly understand what the partners are good at," he said, "And local authorities are seriously good at a lot of things, like securing funds."

If the prospect of an easier working life is not enough incentive to develop better relationships, what then about the prospect of more cash? Basil Jackson said it is important for local authorities to align with government policy and draw down as much funding as possible. Partnerships in Ben Colson's area sprung up after Norfolk was awarded a large amount of government money with further funding promised - depending on patronage growth over an onerous five-year period. This has been achieved, said Colson, because the partnership imposed responsibilities as well as rights on the participants. What it did not require was any kind of formal agreement. Colson looks to his local authority for: "funding, yes, infrastructure, yes - but the rest is down to me."

Colson says operators need to be honest - he takes his management accounts to quarterly meetings with his local authority: "Consistent; accountable - a requirement set to increase as public funding increases," he said. "Submit fair-priced bids; set fair fare levels; nurture the network; promote the product, have a vision of what they are trying to achieve, and be willing to invest."

The DfT's head of buses and taxis division Phil West also made a speech. He says the government is concerned with three underlying issues in the industry: the rising cost base, declining patronage and the growing differential between the cost of using cars and buses. He says the TIF will be used to address the latter.

Steve Burd (right) and Nigel Featham

Forum showed scope

Steve Burd, managing director of Blackpool Transport and chairman of the North West Bus Forum, explained to *CBW* that the idea for the forum stemmed from discussions in the North West Bus Commission last year about showing local authorities in the area good practise in other areas of the country: "Although there are good local authorities in areas, there is scope for greater partnership," he says.

Nigel Featham, MD of Warrington Borough Transport, played a key role in organising the forum and negotiated partial funding with the NWDA. Along with other sponsorship, this meant that the day was free to delegates.

"We had a shopping list of people we wanted to come and speak and we are delighted that the vast majority on the original list agreed," he said. "We are sure that the delegates have been given the message we wanted to get across – to emphasise the importance of working together to achieve common aims. These examples of good practise will hopefully spur various local authorities and operators to adapt to new ways of working."

Never underestimate the power of personalities

Stuart Wrigley, Lancs CC

Andy Campbell, managing director of Stagecoach in Cambridgeshire - one of Basil Jackson's operator partners - agreed that open, honest and sharing relationships are vital, adding that managing disagreement is also important, as is recognising that neither partner is ever going to get everything they want.

Delegates left the conference in no doubt as to which way the wind is blowing in the North West. Partnership is becoming such a well-worn word. As Stuart Wrigley said: "Local government is awash with partnerships." The true meaning of partnership is possibly in danger of being lost. All the emphasis on partnership *per se* obscures the fact that it is just a step in the right direction. Having now done a great job on refreshing stakeholders' perceptions of the word, perhaps the next North West Bus Forum will be able to tackle the really thorny issue that confronts the industry: growing patronage.

THE END FOR CD TOUR GUIDES?

A virtual tour guide triggered by GPS technology could see the end of CD-based systems.

Turning Points Ltd has adapted its Soundscape audio virtual tour guide system to meet the specific and demanding requirements of busy city-centre sightseeing tour bus applications.

Developed in co-operation with Danish company Paaske Bus, the Soundscape system delivers GPS-triggered recorded commentaries with accuracy and reliability in a busy city-centre setting and within the operating environment of a typical open top sightseeing bus.

Paaske began considering a GPS alternative to its existing push-button, CD-based system for a variety of reasons, but primarily because of passenger and driver safety: a system that automatically triggers a commentary when the appropriate point of interest approaches clearly represents an improvement in safety compared with the driver either pressing a button or foot-switch.

Managing director of Turning Points, Ian Walsh, said: "The Soundscape system is used by long-haul coach and river tour operators, for both single language and multiple languages.

"It provides a seamless commentary throughout the journey, allowing passengers to relax, comfortable in the knowledge that the driver is focusing solely on driving the vehicle.

"Working with Paaske, we have fine-tuned the system to meet the challenges that city centre applications pose for GPS-based systems, chief among which is the need to be able to deliver a succession of short commentaries over a relatively short distance and with great precision."

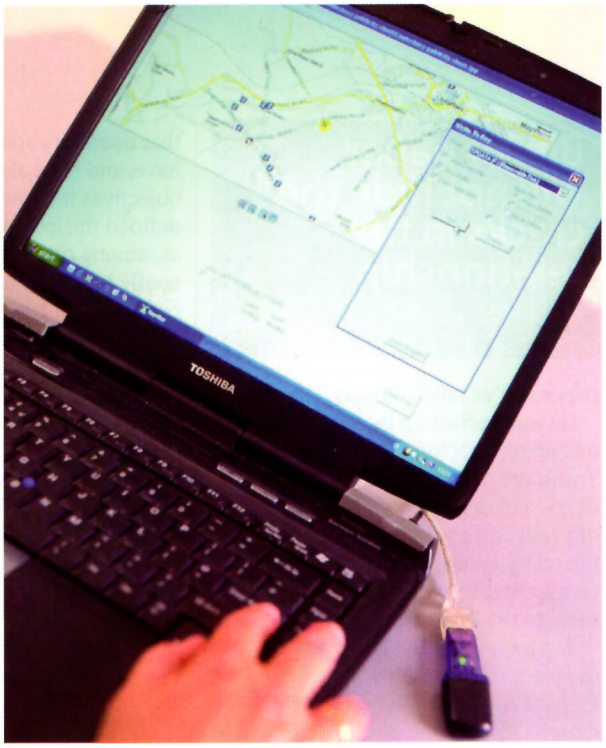
With commentaries in up to 11 different languages, Paaske was looking to improve on the array of CDs required to cover the variety of different tours and languages. Management of the commentaries posed considerable challenges, not to mention the occasional 'disappearance' of a CD or two from the bus.

Another satisfied customer is Crispin Avon, sales representative for City Sightseeing Denmark. He said: "The Soundscape system takes up relatively little space on the bus and is easy to use, with the driver being able to select the route and languages required at the beginning of each journey. So for example, if on the first tour, the bus had Japanese and Russian passengers on board, but the second tour has a group of French people, you can deselect a language that isn't required and replace it with a commentary in French. This can all be done without the driver having to leave his seat or disconnect anything from the system.

"In a city environment, with small medieval streets and plenty of traffic lights, this is very important. Often a track will need to activate next to a certain post box or road sign, so that by the time the passengers turn to look, the Royal Palace that is being talked about will be in their eye-line."

Soundscape commentaries are filed by their geographical location, rather than being assigned to a specific route. As each new point of interest is added to the system, a library of commentaries builds up. This library can be stored on the Soundscape unit or on a removable data storage key or card.

■ www.soundscapeexperience.com
Call 01795 411535



The Soundscape system can be tailored to meet your individual needs. Left: WA Shearings is among the operators using Soundscape

CARLYLE ADDS NEW MANCHESTER BRANCH

Carlyle Bus & Coach has extended its parts delivery network with a new, dedicated site in Manchester.

The premises officially opened at the beginning of this month and its location is designed to offer a faster and more efficient service to operators in the area.

Strategically located close to the motorway network it can quickly supply parts to Blackpool, Burnley, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield.

The new facility, managed by Jason Wallwork, will stock a large range of products and has wider access to Carlyle's comprehensive range of glass, body fittings, electrical components, wipers, mirrors and other accessories.

Carlyle chairman John Turton said: "Opening the Manchester branch is part of our planned expansion programme designed to meet the needs of operators throughout the UK and Ireland, offering the operationally proven service Carlyle has built its reputation on.

"Initial feedback from the operators in the area has been very encouraging."

The new facility is located at Unit 5A, Priestley Road, Wardley Industrial Estate, Worsley, Manchester M28 2LY.

■ Call 0161 457 9800. Fax 0161 973 7812

Carlyle chairman John Turton

Have you taken delivery of a new vehicle and want to tell the world about it? Email all the details and pictures to *jack.thorpe@rouncymedia.co.uk* or write to the address on page 3

FIVE STAR GROUP TRAVEL

Merseryside operator Five Star Group Travel has taken delivery of this Bova Futura FHD 12.30XE Intergral 12m coach.

The vehicle boasts O/S centre sunken demountable toilet and continental door, Webasto pre-heater with digital timer and ASR traction control.

Five Star has been operating both nationally and internationally since 1991. It specialises in tailor-made tours to the customers' exact specifications as well as providing its own selection of pre-designated tours. In recent years the company has moved in excess of 2000 people on many occasions both within the UK and abroad in particular for certain European football matches.

Upcoming tours include Paris, Ostend and Lourdes.

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Bova Futura FHD 12.30XE
Engine DAF
Transmission 6-speed manual
Seats 49/53
Spec Fridge, boiler, PA/CD
Bought from Moseley PCV 01977 609000

McLEANS COACHES

Cotswold based McLeans Coaches have just taken delivery of two new Volvo B12Bs for UK and European touring work.

The Sunsundegui bodied coaches feature Volvo DH12D 420bhp engines coupled to an I-Shift gearbox. One is configured with 43 seats and will be used on contract hire for Grand UK Tours. The other is a 49 seater which will be used on McLeans own tour programme throughout the UK and Europe. Both feature full climate control, toilet, TV/DVD player and hot and cold drinks facilities.

Since acquiring the company 18 months ago, these are the first new vehicles the directors have purchased, and according to director, Roger Alder, the decision to opt for Volvo was based on product quality.

He said: "As we were making a large investment we wanted the best product and felt this was it.

"Fellow director Mark Hapden has worked with Volvos for many years and found them to be extremely reliable.

"In addition, the I-Shift is new to us and is already proving a hit with the drivers. So if they continue to live up to expectation, these coaches could be the first of many!"

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Sunsundegui
Engine Volvo DH12D 420bhp
Transmission I-Shift
Seats 43/49
Spec Climate control, toilet, TV/DVD
Bought from Volvo Coach Sales 01509 217700

FIRTH TRAVEL

Firth Travel of Ackworth, near Pontefract, has recently taken delivery of a new 12m Volvo B12B Van Hool Alizee T9 Alicron.

The vehicle is well-equipped for Firth's tour work. The reclining seats have leather inlay on the headrests and leather piping to moquette seams. There are aircraft style doors to the overhead storage.

A manual drop-down centre monitor, 10 disc CD changer and wiring for DVD player mean entertainment is at hand for long excursions.

The vehicle also has Sutrak AC310/A air conditioning, drinks facilities and a fridge, as well as a sunken washroom.

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Volvo B12B/Van Hool Alizee 79 Alicron
Engine 420bhp
Transmission I-Shift
Seats 49/53
Spec CD/DVD, air con, fridge
Bought from Moseley PCV 01977 609000

Parker takes reins at First Aircoach

FirstGroup has announced the appointment of Allen Parker as managing director of its Irish Aircoach operation, replacing Marc Reddy, who had been acting MD for the last 12 months.

Mr. Parker joins Aircoach from ComfortDelGro where he headed up the group's Irish operations as managing director of both Citylink (Ireland) and Aerdart Limited. He has also held a number of roles with Bus Éireann.

Founded in 1999 as a city to airport link in Dublin, the company was acquired by FirstGroup in 2003, and has been on a growth curve ever since, developing new provincial services linking Dublin City and Dublin airport with Belfast and Cork.

Commenting on his appointment, Mr. Parker said: "Aircoach has quickly established itself as a brand with a strong reputation for quality and service. I am delighted to be joining the Aircoach team at this exciting time and look forward to building on the successes already achieved by the team."

Allen Parker heads Aircoach

New Original MD

Arriva plc has announced the appointment of Bob Scowen as managing director of The Original Tour - the Group's London sightseeing operation.

The Original Tour, which recently won the UKInbound inaugural Chairman's award for Innovation, was founded in 1951.

Mr Scowen said of his appointment: "The Original Tour has been showing off London's greatest sights to domestic and international visitors since 1951 and continues to grow

"Through innovations such as introducing the first-ever wheelchair accessible open topped buses in the capital, The Original Tour has consolidated its position as market leader."

Mark Yexley, managing director for Arriva London, which supports and oversees The Original Tour, added: "It's fantastic to have someone with Bob's experience driving The Original Tour forward."

Bright-Tech sales director retires

Bright-Tech's sales director, John Stormont, has decided to retire after 17 years with the company. Mr Stormont is well-known throughout the industry, having spent some of his career with Wayfarer: "Replacing someone with John's integrity and professionalism will not be easy, but everyone has to retire some time, and we wish John well for the future," said MD Frank Guinn.

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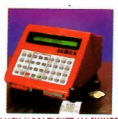

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BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

COMPETITION COMMISSION

JOINT VENTURE BETWEEN STAGECOACH AND SCOTTISH CITYLINK

Competition Commission invites evidence

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has referred the completed joint venture between Stagecoach Bus Holdings Limited and Braddell PLC in relation to the Scottish coach businesses operating as megabus.com, Motorvator and Scottish Citylink to the Competition Commission (CC).

The CC has been asked to decide whether the acquisition may be expected to result in a substantial lessening of competition in the market for the supply of scheduled long-distance coach services in Scotland.

The CC is expected to report by 29 August 2006.

The CC would like to hear from all interested parties, in writing, by 18th April 2006. To submit evidence, please write to: Michelle Horan-Cashmore, Inquiry Secretary (Stagecoach/Scottish Citylink inquiry), Competition Commission, Victoria House, Southampton Row, London WC1B 4AD. Or email: michelle.horan-cashmore@cc.gsi.gov.uk

PROMOTING FAIR COMPETITION

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Norfolk County Council
at your service

Department of Planning and Transportation, Passenger Transport Unit

Tenders are invited for Local Bus Service and Education contracts operating in Norfolk. The education contracts cover Norwich, Swaffham, Stalham, Broadland, Aylsham, North Walsham, King's Lynn, Loddon, Beccles and Acle. The local bus contracts include the North Norfolk, Breckland, King's Lynn and Diss areas: -

- Education contracts start in September 2006 and Local bus contracts start on various dates from September 2006.

Full details are available on application from the Passenger Transport Unit, County Hall, NORWICH NR1 2SG, or email ptu@norfolk.gov.uk or call 01603 224359.

Tenders must be returned to the Head of Democratic Services by 2pm on the following:-

Swaffham Area Schools - Thursday 4 May 2006.

King's Lynn Area Schools, Beccles/Loddon Area Schools, North East Norfolk Area Schools, Norwich Schools and Countywide Bulk-Flow contracts - All Thursday 25 May 2006.

Local Bus Services - Thursday 25 May 2006.

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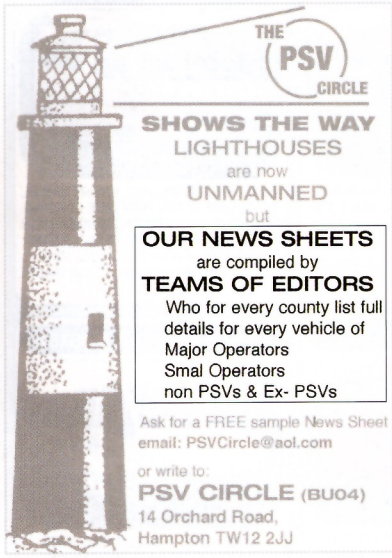
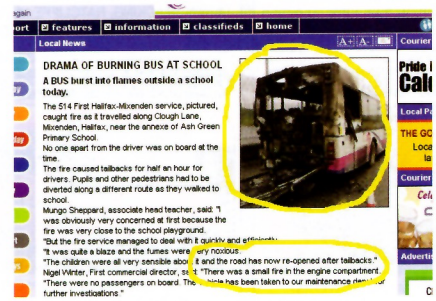
No need to mock...



As journalists, we are always slightly wary of pointing out errors in others' work, because we know that, sure enough, on the same day we point out an amusing mistake, our front page will bear the legend 'Caoch and Bus Week'. But we couldn't help but be tickled by these two cuttings.

The first, from a regional news website, features First man Nigel Winter explaining that a bus has suffered a 'small fire' in its engine. The picture, however begs to differ.

The second's boast of news sheets 'compiled by teams of editors' loses its impact when it goes on to explain it lists details of vehicles belonging to 'smal operators'.



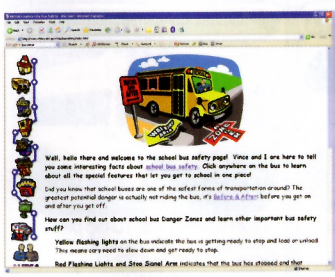
Retiring... after 76 years' service

Having already been honoured by former US President Bill Clinton as Employee of the Century, Los Angeles bus cleaner Arthur Winston has himself hit the 'century' mark - and decided to retire.

He'd been with the Los Angeles Transit Authority for a staggering 76 years' unbroken service. Even more amazing is that he's had just ONE day off in that time - when his wife died, in 1988.

But that's by no means the whole story. Mr Winston's working life spans some 90 years (yes, you've read that right) as he started his daily toil aged 10 when he picked cotton in the Deep South. When the harvests failed in 1924, his family headed west and he got a job on the railways.

To cap it all, Mr Winston says that even now he's not being put out to grass. After a visit to his younger brother, 98, he says he's looking for a job caring for the elderly...



Googled...

http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/kids/bussafety/index.html

What makes the American school bus system work? The advice on sites like that run by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, laid out specifically for kids to read. The bus safety advice page offers sound sense that would transfer well to the UK school bus market. Yes, it's about 'yellow buses' but it's still excellent

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Two minute interview

Full name: Roger Mott
Age: 52
Occupation: MD Motts Coaches
Is the PSV industry on its way up, down or static? Down at present but I am optimistic for the future. Being a 'cottage industry' there is tremendous resistance to change.
Which piece of recent legislation has been the most irritating or useless? The Working Time Directive in its application to PCV drivers is time consuming and to me irrelevant. In our operation it takes a manager three hours a week to complete the records over and above what we keep for EC driver regulations. It's like working with two sets of rules to achieve the same ends.
Give the industry's business managers 20 words of helpful advice: Don't live in the past. Concentrate on offering a quality service that can be sustained.
Which vehicle – coach, bus, motorcycle or car – do you love the most, and why? I have owned a Daimler SP250 (Dart) for 25 years, handles like a pig looks a bit like one but with a wonderful 2.5-litre Turner V8 engine. Often referred to as 'drastic plastic' - being one of the first production fibreglass sports cars
If you asked your best friend or partner, what would they say is your worst attribute? The amount of hours I spend at work!
Who would play you in the film version of the story of your life? Benny Hill 'Fred Scuttle reporting for duty'
Who would you have as your co-star? Barbara Windsor, could produce a few laughs

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X REG PEUGEOT BOXER

2.5 DIESEL, 5 SPEED, PAS, LONG WHEEL BASE, HIGH ROOF, SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 12 SEMI HIGH BACK SEATS, UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, V GOOD CONDITION, ONE OWNER

V REG MERCEDES SPRINTER 410D

TURBO DIESEL, PAS, LWB, HIGH ROOF, MELLOR CONVERSION, FRONT ENTRY SIDE DOOR WITH LOW STEP, 15 REMOVABLE HIGH BACK SEATS, UNWIN TRACKING, RATCLIFFE UNDER-FLOOR TAIL LIFT, ONE OWNER,COIF

1999 T REG IVECO 49.10

TURBO DAILY, LONG WHEEL BASE, 5 SPEED , PAS, HIGH ROOF POWER DOOR FRONT ENTRY WITH STEP,16 HIGH BACK SEATS,UNWIN TRACKING, RATCLIFF UNDERFLOOR TAIL LIFT,ONE OWNER EX LOCAL AUTHORITY, 65,000 MILES,

51 REG, VOLKSWAGEN LT28

2.5 TURBO DIESEL, PAS, SHORT WHEEL BASE, LOW ROOF, TWIN SIDE LOADING DOORS WITH STEP,8 PASSENGER HIGH BACK SEATS WITH HEADREST, RICON TAIL LIFT, UNWIN TRACKING, MINT CONDITION ONE OWNER, 36,000 MILES. IDEAL TAXIS

T REG 1999 FORD TRANSIT 2.5 TD

MANUAL,CHASSIS DEVELOPMENT COACHBUILT BODY, P A S, 15 REMOVABLE SEMI HIGH BACK SEAT'S,UNWIN TRACKING, RICON UNDERFLOOR TAIL LIFT, SLIDING DOOR FRONT ENTRY,ONE OWNER, EX LOCAL AUTHORITY, 48,000 MILES

Y REG 2001 VOLKSWAGEN TRANSPORTER

2.5TDI AUTOMATIC, POWERED STEERING, MWB, SIDE LOADING DOOR, 5 SEATS PLUS 1 WHEELCHAIR, UNWIN TRACKING, WITH SIDE MOUNTED RICON TAIL LIFT,ONE OWNER, MINT CONDITION, 33,000 MILES

X REG 2001 FORD TRANSIT 2.5 TD

MANUAL,CHASSIS DEVELOPMENT COACHBUILT BODY, PAS, 12 REMOVABLE HIGH BACK SEAT'S,UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, POWER DOOR FRONT ENTRY,ONE OWNER, EX LOCAL AUTHORITY, 63,000 MILES ONE REMAINING

2000 V REG PEUGEOT BOXER

2.5 DIESEL, 5 SPEED, PAS, L W B, EXCEL CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 12 SEMI HIGH BACK SEATS , UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, V GOOD CONDITION, ONE OWNER

02 REG RENAULT MASTER

LM35, 2.DCI , 5 SPEED, PAS, LWB, EUROMOTIVE CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP, 12 SEATS, GLIDE RITE LOWERING SUSPENSION WITH FOLD OUT RAMP, UNWIN TRACKING, MINT CONDITION ONE OWNER, 55,000 MILES

2001-04 REG RENAULT MASTER

MM33, 2.2 DCI, 5 SPEED, PAS, MWB, O & H CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP, 7 SEATS PLUS 2 WHEELCHAIR SPACES, RICON TAIL LIFT, UNWIN TRACKING, MINT CONDITION ONE OWNER. CHOICE OF THREE

T REG IVECO 59.12

2.8 DIESEL TURBO, MELLOR COACHBUILT BODY, P A S, 16 REMOVABLE SEMI HIGH BACK SEAT'S,UNWIN TRACKING, PLS FULLY AUTOMATIC TAIL LIFT, FRONT ENTRY,ONE OWNER, EX LOCAL AUTHORITY, LOW MILES 66,000 KMS

V REG VOLKSWAGEN LT46

TURBO DIESEL, PAS, LWB, WHITACRES CONVERSION, LARGE POWER PLUG DOOR, HIGH ROOF, 16 REMOVABLE HIGH BACK SEATS, UNWIN TRACKING, RATCLIFFE UNDERFLOOR TAIL LIFT, ONE OWNER, COIF. CHOICE OF TWO

52 REG 2003 RENAULT MASTER

LM35, 2.5, 5 SPEED, PAS, LONG WHEEL BASE, MELLOR CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 16 HIGH BACK M2 TESTED SEATS PLUS DRIVER, MINT CONDITION, ONE OWNER, 6,000 MILES,

51 REG IVECO 40.C13

2.9 TURBO DIESEL, PAS, IRIS CONVERSION 16 HIGH BACK SEATS. SLAM FRONT ENTRY DOOR, HIGH ROOF ,BONDED WINDOWS , M2 TESTED FLOOR, UNWIN TRACKING, HEATER, UNDERFLOOR RATCLIFF TAIL LIFT, LOW MILEAGE 43,000 KMS .

04+54 REG RENAULT MASTER T35

2.5, 5 SPEED,PAS, LWB, MELLOR CONVERSION, SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP, 14 SEATS OR 10 PLUS 2 WHEEL CHAIRS, UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, MINT CONDITION, LOW MILEAGE. CHOICE OF FOUR

02 REG, VOLKSWAGEN LT35

2.5 TURBO DIESEL 109 BHP, PAS, LUXURY SPEC FRANK GUY CONVERSION, TWIN SLD'S, TINTED WINDOWS, 10 HIGH BACK SEATS,OVER HEAD LOCKERS, WITH AIR & LAMPS REAR STORAGE AREA, EBERSPACHER CLIMATE CONTROL, EX DEMO 16,000 MILES

VOLKSWAGEN LT35 2.5 TURBO DIESEL

NEW UN REGISTERED, LWB, UPRATED TO 3850KGS GVW, 15 ABACUS HIGH BACK SEATS + DRIVER,.SLIDING SIDE DOOR WITH AVS STEP, HIGH ROOF, UNWIN TRACKING, AMF PLS FULLY AUTOMATIC INTERNAL TAIL LIFT, NEW CONVERSION IN STOCK

NEW 06 REG, IVECO 40.C13

2.9 TURBO DIESEL IRIS CONVERSION 14 HIGH BACK COGENT SEATS. DOUBLE FRONT PASSENGER SEAT, SIDE-LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP, HIGH ROOF, M2 FLOOR, LOTS OF SPACE, DELIVERY MILEAGE ONLY, IN STOCK

2002 52 REG FORD TRANSIT 350

LONG WHEEL BASE, TURBO DIESEL, AUTOMATIC, PAS, HIGH ROOF SIDE ENTRY DOOR WITH STEP,12 HIGH BACK SEATS ,UNWIN TRACKING FOR 2 W/ CHAIRS RATCLIFF UNDERFLOOR TAIL LIFT,ONE OWNER, VERY LOW MILES 5500 MILES

NEW UN REGISTERED VOLKSWAGEN LT46

TURBO DIESEL, VDL KUSTER CONVERSION, 16 SEATS. LARGE POWER PLUG DOOR, HIGH ROOF, BONDED WINDOWS , LOW M2 FLOOR, M2 HIGH BACK SEATS 3 WHEEL CHAIR POSITIONS ,TRACKING, HEATER, LOWERED FLOOR WITH FOLD OUT SIDE RAMP

Y REG TOYOTA HIACE

2.4 DIESEL,5 SPEED ,PAS, MEDIUM WHEEL BASE, LOW ROOF, SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 3 SEATS 7 TWO WHEEL CHAIR POSITIONS,Q-SRAINT RESTRAINT SYSTEM, RICON FULLY AUTOMATIC TAIL LIFT, ONE OWNER MINT CONDITION , 33,000 MILES

W REG IVECO TURBO DAILY CREWCAB

2.9 TURBO DIESEL, PAS, FITTED WITH DROPSIDE STEEL BODY TIPPER AND PTO WITH HEAVY DUTY AIR COMPRESSOR FOR KANGOO'S ETC ONLY 90HRS ORANGE LIGHT BAR AND TOOL LOCKER, ONE OWNER ONLY 43,000 MILES MINT CONDITION.

04 REG, VOLKSWAGEN LT35

MWB, 2.5 TURBO DIESEL 109 BHP,PAS, ADVACED CONVERSION, SLD, 8 HIGH BACK SEATS + DRIVER, REAR BULK HEAD FITTED WITH MICROWAVE AND HANDWASH REAR STORAGE AREA WITH HAND WASH AND TOOL STORAGE, EX DEMO 16,000 MILES

1999 T REG PEUGEOT BOXER

2.5 DIESEL ,5 SPEED ,PAS, L W B, EUROMOTIVE CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 11 SEMI HIGH BACK SEATS , UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, 52,000 MILES. V GOOD CONDITION , ONE OWNER